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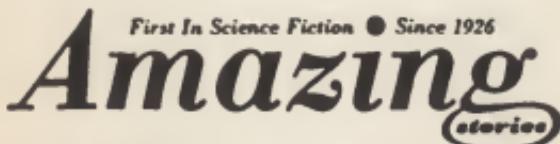
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APRIL 1967

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FIRST OF TWO PARTS

His reputation now solidly established—with topnotch novels like "Under Pressure," "Do I Wake or Dream?" and Dune (a double prize-winner, having taken both a Hugo and a Science Fiction Writers of America award as the best s-f novel of 1965)—ex-newspaperman and photographer Frank Herbert reaches even higher with "Heaven Makers"—which offers the chilling hypothesis that all the world really is a stage with each of us—especially nurse Ruth Hudson and psychologist Andy Thurlow—its players. And who the audience? Why, all those Chem out there, of course, watching us on their pantovive sets!

The Heaven Makers FRANK HERBERT

Illustrated by MORROW

Every man is as Heaven made him, and sometimes a great deal worse.

— Miguel de Cervantes —

FULL of forebodings and the most unique tensions that an adult Chem had ever experienced, Kelexel the Investigator came down into the storyship where it hid beneath the ocean. He pressed his slender craft through the barrier that stood like lines of insect legs in the green murk and debarked on the long grey landing platform.

All around him flickering yellow discs and globes of working craft arrived and departed. It was early daylight topside, and from

this ship Fraffin the Director was composing a story.

To be here, Kelexel thought. Actually to be on Fraffin's world.

He felt that he knew this world intimately—all those hours before the pantovive watching Fraffin's stories about the place unroll before his eyes. Background study for the investigation it'd been called. But what Chem wouldn't have traded places with him then—gladly?

To be on Fraffin's world!

That morning topside—he had seen such mornings many times, caught by Fraffin's shooting crews: the torn sky, cloud-pillars on gilded cushions. And the crea-

tures! He could almost hear a priestmother murmuring, her voice firmly hesitant before a Chem posing as a god. Ah, such buttersoft women they were, generous with their barbed kisses.

But those times were gone—except for Frazin's reels. The creatures of this world had been herded into new avenues of excitement.

In the pangs of remembering Frazin's stories, Kelexel recognized his own ambivalence.

I must not weaken, he thought.

There was an element of grandiose posturing in the thought (hand on breast), and Kelexel permitted an inward chuckle at himself. Frazin had done that for him. Frazin had taught many a Chem a great deal about himself.

In spite of the confusion on the landing platform, the Dispatcher noted Kelexel almost immediately and sent a hovering robot questioner before whose single eye Kelexel bowed and said: "I am a visitor, Kelexel by name."

He did not have to say he was a rich visitor. His craft and his clothing said that for him. The clothing was the quiet forest green of neversoil and cut for comfort; leotards, a simple tunic and an all purpose cape. It gave his squat, bow-legged form a look of rich dignity, setting off the silvery Chem-of-Chem skin,



forcing attention onto the big face with its rock like angles and planes, the sunken and penetrating brown eyes.

The craft which he left in a rest slot beneath the traffic lanes for the working crews was a needleship which could stitch its way across any void in the Chem universe. Only the wealthiest entrepreneurs and Servants of the Primacy owned such ships. Even Fraffin didn't possess one, preferring (so it was said) to plow his wealth back into the world which had brought him such fame.

Kelexel, a visitor—he felt confidence in the cover. The Bureau of Criminal Repression had prepared his role and trappings with care.

"Welcome, visitor Kelexel," the Dispatcher said, his voice amplified through the robot to override the storyship activity. "Take the flex ramp on your left. Please register with our Greeter at the head of the ramp. May your stay with us relieve boredom."

"My gratitude," Kelexel said.

Ritual, everything was ritual, he thought. *Even here.*

He fitted his bowed legs to the riding clamps. The ramp whisked him across the platform, up through a red hatch, along a blue passageway to a glistening ebony orifice. The orifice expanded to reveal a small room and the

Greeter's flashing lights, couch and dangling connections.

Kelexel eyed the robo-couplings, knowing they must be linked to the storyship's Central Directory. Here was the true moment of test for his cover, the heart of Ship Security.

The tensions boiling in him filled Kelexel with sudden wonder. He felt no fear for his person; under his skin—part of his skin—lay the web armor which immunized all Chem from violence. It was improbable that they could harm him. Something approaching the entire Chem civilization was required to harm an individual. Such decisions came rarely and then only because of a clear and positive threat to all Chem.

But four previous investigators had come here and returned to report "no crime" when all surface evidence pointed to something profoundly wrong in Fraffin's private empire. Most disquieting was the fact that all four had left the Service to start their own storyships out on the rims.

Kelexel held this knowledge to him now, secure in the Chem *oneness*, the shared unity that Tiggywaugh's web gave each Chem with his immortality.

I'm ready for you, Greeter, he thought.

He already knew the Primacy's suspicions must be correct. Sens-

es trained to respond to the slightest betrayal recorded more than enough here to bring him to full alert. Signs of decadence he'd expected. Storyships were outposts and outposts tended that way. But there was a surfeit of other symptoms. Certain of the crew moved with that air of knowledgeable superiority which flashed like a warning light in the police eye. There was a casual richness of garb on even the lowliest menials. There was a furtive something here which oozed from the oneness of the web.

He'd seen inside several of the working craft, noted the silver sheen on handles of concealment controls. The creatures of this world had long since passed the stage where Chem could legally reveal themselves on the surface. It was one thing to nudge and herd and manipulate intelligent creatures for the sake of entertainment—"to relieve boredom"—quite another thing to sow the seeds of an awareness that could explode *against* the Chem.

No matter Fraffin's fame and stature, he'd taken a wrong turning somewhere. That was obvious. The stupidity of such an action put a sour taste in Kelexel's mouth. No criminal could escape the Primacy's endless searching—not forever.

Still, this was Fraffin's storyship—Fraffin who had given the Chem surcease from immortal

boredom, given them a world of profound fascination in story after story.

He felt those stories in his memory now, sensed the ringing of old bells, their sound falling, lingering, falling—the parapets of awareness roaring there to willy-nilly purpose. Ahhh, how Fraffin's creatures caught the mind! It was in part their similarity to the Chem, Kelexel felt. They made one disregard their gigantism. They forced one to identify with their dreams and emotions.

Remembering, remembering, Kelexel heard the music of bowstrings, warcries and whimpers, kite-shadowed silences on bloody fields—all Fraffin's doing. He remembered a fair Gutian female, a slave being marched to Babylon in the time of Cabyses—an Egyptian woman taken with her child.

The spoil of the bow, Kelexel thought, recalling the sweep of that one story. One lost female, yet how she lingered in his memory. She had been sacrificed before Nin-Girsu who blessed commerce and litigation and was in reality the voice of a Chem Manipulator in Fraffin's pay.

But here were names and creatures and events the Chem would never have known were it not for Fraffin. This world, Fraffin's storyship empire, had become a byword in the Chem universe. It would not be easy (nor popular) to topple such a one, but

Kelexel could see that it must be done.

I must destroy you, Kelexel thought as he coupled himself to the Greeter. He stared with quiet interest up at the scanners which flowed across him, searching, searching. This was normal and to be expected from Ship Security. To be a Chem immortal was to submit to this as a matter of course. There could be no threat to any Chem except from his fellow Chem united — and the Chem could be united by false ideas as well as true ones. False assumptions, fantastic plots—only the Primacy was supposed proof against such base maneuvers. Fraffin had to satisfy himself that the visitor wasn't a competitor's spy intending secret harm.

How little you know of harm, Kelexel thought as he felt the Greeter probe him. *I need only my senses and my memory to destroy you.*

He wondered then what specific criminal act would trip up Faffin. Was he breeding some of his creatures for short stature, selling them as pets? Were his people openly fraternizing with their planet-bound giants? Was secret knowledge being fed to the creatures? They did, after all, have crude rockets and satellites. Was theirs an unreported *infectious* intelligence, full of immunes, ready to blast out into

the universe and oppose the Chem?

It must be one of these, Kelexel thought. The signs of secrecy were all here on Faffin's world. There was guilty knowledge in the storyship.

Why would Faffin do such a stupid thing? Kelexel wondered. *The criminal!*

The Greeter's report came to Faffin where he sat at his pantovive editing the latest rushes on his current story.

The war, the war, the lovely little war, he was thinking.

And oh, how Chem audiences loved the effect of flame-lighted nights, the naked pantings of these creatures in their mortal struggles. One of their leaders reminded him of Cato—the same eternally ancient features, the cynical glaze of inward-drinking eyes. Cato, now . . . there'd been a grand story.

But the pantovive's three-dimensional images faded, the tracing light receded before the priority of a message, and there was Ynvic's face staring at him, her bald head glistening under the lights in her surgery, her heavy brows arched in a quizzical frown.

"A visitor calling himself Kelexel has arrived," she said. (And Faffin, watching the flash of her teeth, the heavy lips, thought: *She's overdue for rejuvenation.*) "This Kelexel most

likely is the Investigator we've been expecting," she added.

Fraffin straightened, uttered a curse that'd been popular on his world in the time of Hasdrubal: "Bal, burn their seed!" Then: "How certain are you?"

"The visitor is a visitor to perfection," Ynvic said. She shrugged. "He is too perfect. Only the Bureau could be that perfect."

Fraffin settled back into his editing chair. She was probably correct. The Investigator's timing was about right. Out in the Chem universe they didn't have this feeling for the nicety of timing. Time ran at such a crazy speed for most Chem. But association with the creatures of this world imparted a pseudo-sense of time. Yes, it was probably the Investigator.

He looked up and around at his silver-walled salon-office in the heart of the storyship. This long low place crammed with creative machinery and the devices of relaxation usually remained insulated from transient planetary distractions. As a rule, only Ynvic dared disturb him at his work here. She would not do it lightly. Something about this visitor, Kelexel, had alerted her.

Fraffin sighed.

Even through the storyship's sophisticated barriers and the deeps of ocean in which they hid, he often felt that he could sense the passage of the planet's

sun and moon and that troubles waited for the worst conjunctions to plague him.

Waiting behind him on his desk was a report from Lutt, his Master-of-Craft, that a new three-man shooting crew, youngsters of promise all, had been out on the surface with shields down, letting the natives see them, stirring up a storm of local speculation. Teasing the natives was, of course, an ancient diversion with the Chem of this storyship.

But not now.

Why did they choose this particular moment? he wondered.

"We'll throw this Kelexel a sop," he said. "The shooting crew that was out teasing the natives. Dismissal for all of them and for the dispatcher who allowed them to surface without an old hand as guide."

"They may talk," Ynvic said.

"They don't dare," he said. "Anyway, explain what's happened and send them along with recommendations to one of the new ships. I hate to lose them, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Is that all you're going to do?" Ynvic asked.

Fraffin passed a hand over his eyes, scratched his left brow. Her meaning was clear, but he hated to abandon the lovely little war. He stared into the glittering shell of the pantovive where his memory still held the lingering images of violence. If he pulled out his Manipulators, the natives

likely would settle their differences across a conference table. They had that tendency more and more of late.

Again, he thought of the problems awaiting him at his desk. There was the memo from Albik, the storychief, the usual complaint: "If you wish me to cover this much story action *simultaneously*, then I must have more skimmers and platforms, more shooting crews, more cutting-room operators . . . more . . . more . . . more . . ."

Fraffin longed for the good old days when Birstala had been his storychief. There was a man capable of making his own decisions when the equipment and crews wouldn't stretch. But Birstala had succumbed to the immortal nemesis, boredom. He had his own storyship now with the seed from this planet and his own world somewhere off beyond the beyond. He had his own problems.

"Maybe you should sell out," Ynvic said.

He glared at her. "That's impossible and you know why!"

"The right buyer . . ."

"Ynvic!"

She shrugged.

Fraffin pushed himself out of the editing chair, crossed to his desk. Its immersed viewscreen showed the discus galaxies and variable stars of the Chem birth-worlds. A touch of the controls and this scene vanished to pre-

sent a view from space looking down on their private little planet, this blue-green world with its patterns of clouds over seas and continents, the sharp flakes of star cosmos beyond.

His own features lay there suddenly reflected in the desk's polished surface as though swimming out of the planet: the sensual mouth in a straight line, nostrils flared in his narrow hooked nose, dark eyes brooding under overhanging brows, the high forehead with twin coves of silvery Chem flesh in the short black hair.

Ynvic's face came through the Central Directory's message center relays to dance above the desk and stare at him expectantly.

"I've given my opinion," she said.

Fraffin looked up at the Ship-surgeon, a bald, round-faced Chem of the Ceyatril breed—old, old even by Chem standards—extravagant with age. A thousand stars such as the sun which whirled this planet in its loop of gravity could have been born and died in the life of Shipsurgeon Ynvic. There were rumors she'd been a planet buyer once and even a member of the Larra crew which had probed the other dimensions. She wouldn't say, naturally, but the story persisted.

"I can never sell it, Ynvic," he said. "You know that."

"A Chem is wise to avoid the word *never*," she said.

"What do our sources say about this Kelexel?" he asked.

"That he's a rich merchant, recently allowed to breed, favored by the Primacy."

"And you think he's the new snooper."

"I think it."

If Ynvic thinks it, then it's probably true, he thought.

He knew he was stalling, vacillating. He didn't want to drop the lovely little war and gear the ship to meet this new threat.

Perhaps Ynvic's right, he thought. *I've been here too long, eaten too much identification with our poor, ignorant natives.*

Another snooper from the Bureau come to watch us!

And what the man sought could not be hidden long. Ynvic was saying that to him with every word and gesture.

I should abandon this planet, he thought. *How did I absorb so much identification with these gross, stupid savages? We don't even share death in common. They die; we don't.*

I've been one of their gods!

What if this snooper cannot be tempted?

Damn the Bureau!

"He's not going to be an easy one, this Investigator," Ynvic said. "He poses as one of the very rich. If he bids on the ship, why not confound them—sell out. What could they do? You could

plead ignorance; the entire ship would back you."

"Dangerous . . . dangerous," Frazin said.

"But enough profit to oppose any danger," she said.

"Any danger?"

"As the parable has it," Ynvic said, "the Gods smile on profit."

Gods, commerce and bureaucracy, Frazin thought. *These endure, even among our poor savages. But I'm trapped here, grown too much like my simple creatures.* He held out his right hand, looked at the palm. *My hand's in their every heritage. I'm the germ of yesterday resurrecting faces out of Babylon.*

"Kelexel has requested an interview with the great Frazin," Ynvic said. "He's been . . ."

"I'll see him," Frazin said. He hid his palm in a clenched fist. "Yes. Send him to me."

"No!" Ynvic said. "Refuse him, let your agents . . ."

"On what grounds? I've seen other rich merchants."

"Any grounds. Whim, an artist's impulse, pressure of work."

"I think I shall see him. Is he internally instrumented?"

"Of course not; they wouldn't be that simple. But why would you . . ."

"To feel him out."

"You've professionals for that job."

"But he wants to see me."

"Here is real danger. Let him once suspect and he'll not bid.

He'll just snoop until he has us all in his noose."

"He may not bid anyway. Someone must find what will tempt him."

"We know what'll tempt him! But let him get just the faintest hint that we can interbreed with these savages, the most vague suspicion, and we've lost him . . . and ourselves as well."

"I'm not a child to be lectured to, Ynvic. I'll see him."

"You're determined, then?"

"I am. Where is he?"

"Out on the surface with a tour crew."

"Ahhh. And we're monitoring, of course. What does he think of our creatures?"

"The conventional things: they're so gross, ugly—like caricatures of Chem humanity."

"But what do his eyes say?"

"The females interest him."

"Of course they do."

"Then you're going to withdraw from the war drama, and set up a story for him?"

"What else can we do?" His voice revealed frustration and resignation.

"What'll you use? That little group in Delhi?"

"No, I'm saving that one for an emergency, a *real* emergency."

"The girls' school in Leeds?"

"Inappropriate. What do you think, Ynvic—will violence catch his mind?"

"Definitely. It's the murder school in Berlin, then, eh?"

"No, no! I think I have something much better. I'll discuss it after I've seen him. As soon as he returns, have . . ."

"One moment," Ynvic said. "Not the immune—not that one!"

"Why not? Compromise him completely."

"That's all this investigator would need! That alone without . . ."

"The immune can be killed at any time," Frazin said.

"This Kelexel is not stupid!"

"I'll be cautious."

"Just remember, old friend," Ynvic said, "that I'm in this as deeply as you. Most of the crew could probably get off with sentences of constructive labor, but I'm the one who faked the gene samples we sent the Primacy."

"I hear you," Frazin said. "The word is caution."

Feeling reasonably secure behind his cover, Kelexel paused just inside the salon-office of the storyship director. He cast a searching look around the room: such interesting signs of wear on furnishings supposedly resistant to such depletion. The control supports of an editing chair showed a polished glitter where Frazin's arms had rested.

He has been here a very long time indeed, Kelexel thought. We are right to suspect the worst. A Chem's attention span cannot be

that long—unless there are forbidden attractions.

"Visitor Kelexel," Frazin said, rising. He indicated a chair facing him across the desk, a simple wooden artifact native to this place. It was a nice touch of the exotic, made a stranger feel uncomfortably alien and unadapted to outpost living. Frazin himself occupied a conventional floater seat, its body sensors tuned to his personal needs.

Kelexel bowed over the immersed viewer in the desk, used the formal greeting: "Director Frazin, the light of a billion suns could not add one candlepower to thy brilliance."

Oh, Lords of Being, Frazin thought. *One of those!* He smiled, timed his seating to coincide with Kelexel.

"I grow dim in the presence of my guest," Frazin said. "How may I serve such a distinguished person?" And he thought: *Preferably on buttered toast.*

Kellexel swallowed, felt suddenly uneasy. Something about Frazin bothered him. The director was such a small man—dwarfed by the desk and its instruments. Frazin's skin was the milk-silver of the Sirihadi Chem, almost matching the room's walls. It was the man's stature; that was it. Kellexel had expected someone larger—not as large as the vassals of this planet, certainly . . . but . . . larger . . . something to go

with all the power visible in his features.

"You were very kind to grant me your time," Kelexel said.

Conventionally, Frazin said: "What is time to the Chem?"

But Kelexel didn't rise to the cliche. The power in Frazin's face! It was a famous face, of course—the black hair, the pits of eyes under jutting brows, crag cheeks, outcroppings of nose and jaw. Large reproductions of that face danced on the air wherever a Frazin story was shown. But the actual flesh and bone man bore an unretouched resemblance to the reproductions that Kelexel found disturbing. He had expected more false drama in one or the other. He had expected disparity, a sham somewhere to help him see through these people.

"Visitors don't usually request an interview with the director," Frazin said, prodding.

"Yes, yes, of course," Kelexel said. "I've a . . ." He hesitated, realization coming over him. Everything about Frazin—timbre of voice, the rich skin color, the total aura of vitality—it all spoke of recent rejuvenation. But Frazin's cycle was known to the Bureau. He wasn't due for rejuvenation in this period.

"Yes?" Frazin said.

"I've . . . a rather personal request," Kelexel said.

"Not for employment, I hope," Frazin said. "We've so . . ."

"Nothing for myself," Kelexel said. "My interest level is quite low. Travel seems to satisfy me. However, during my last cycle I was permitted to have a male offspring."

How fortunate for you," Frazin said, and he held himself still and watchful, wondering: *Could the man know? Is it possible?*

"Mmm, yes," Kelexel said. "My offspring, however, requires constant diversion. I'm prepared to pay a very high price for the privilege of placing him with your organization until my contract of responsibility terminates."

Kelexel sat back, waiting. *He will be suspicious of you, naturally,* the Bureau's experts has said. *He will think you seek to place a spy among his crewmen. Be alert to his inner reactions when you make your offer.*"

Watching now, Kelexel saw the Director's disquiet. *Is he fearful? Kelexel wondered. He shouldn't be fearful—not yet.*

"It saddens me," Frazin said, "but no matter the offer, I must refuse."

Kelexel pursed his lips, then: "Would you refuse . . ." And he named a price that astonished Frazin.

That's half as much as I could get for my entire planetary holding, Frazin thought. *Is it possible Ynvic's wrong about him? This couldn't be an attempt to put a spy among us. All our crewmen*

are bound to the compact of shared guilt. No new man can learn what we do until he's hopelessly compromised. And the Bureau wouldn't try to buy one of us. They don't dare give me grounds for pleading entrapment.

"Is it not enough?" Kelexel asked. He stroked his chin. The Bureau's experts had said: *You must act the part of a responsible citizen concerned over his parental contract, perhaps even a bit doting and slightly embarrassed by it.*"

"It, uhh, grieves me," Frazin said, "but there's no price I'll accept. Were I to lower the barriers to one rich man's offspring, my ship soon would become a haven for dilettantes. We're a working crew, chosen only for talent. If your offspring wishes to train for a post, however, and go through the normal channels . . ."

"Not even if I doubled the offer?" Kelexel asked.

Is it really the Bureau behind this clown? Frazin wondered. Or could he be one of the Galaxy Buyers?

Frazin cleared his throat. "No price. I am sorry."

"Perhaps I've offended you?"

"No. It's just that my decision is dictated by self preservation. Work is our answer to the Chem nemesis . . ."

"Ahh, boredom," Kelexel murmured.

"Precisely," Frazin said.

"Were I to open the doors to any bored person with enough wealth, I'd multiply all our problems. Just today I dismissed four crewmen for actions that's commonplace were I to hire my people the way you suggest."

"Four dismissed?" Kelexel said. "Lords of Preservation! What'd they do?"

"Deliberately lowered their shields, let the natives see them. Enough of that happens by accident without compounding it."

How honest and law abiding he tries to appear, Kelexel thought. But the core of his crew has been with him too long, and those who leave—even the ones he dismisses—won't talk. Something's at work here which can't be explained by legality.

"Yes, yes, of course," Kelexel said, assuming a slightly pompous air. "Can't have fraternizing with the natives out there." He gestured toward the surface with a thumb. "Illegal, naturally. Damnably dangerous.

"Raises the immunity level," Frazin said.

"Must keep your execution squads busy."

Frazin allowed himself a touch of pride, said: "I've had to send them after fewer than a million immunes on my planet. I let the natives kill their own."

"Only way," Kelexel agreed. "Keep us out of it as much as possible. Classic technique. You're justly famous for your suc-

cess at it. Wanted my son to learn under you."

"I'm sorry," Frazin said.

"Answer's definitely no?"

"Definitely."

Kelexel shrugged. The Bureau'd prepared him for outright rejection, but he hadn't quite prepared himself for it. He'd hope to play out the little game of negotiation. "I hope I haven't offended you," he said.

"Of course not," Frazin said. And he thought: *But you've warned me.*

He had come around to complete agreement with Ynvic's suspicions. It was something about this Kelexel's manner—an inward caution that didn't fit the outer mask.

"Glad of that," Kelexel said.

"I'm always curious about the merchant world's current price," Frazin said. "I'm surprised you didn't bid on my entire holding."

You think I've made a mistake, Kelexel thought. Fool! Criminals never learn.

"My holdings are too diverse, require too much of my attention as it is," Kelexel said. "Naturally, I'd thought of bidding you out and giving all this to my offspring, but I'm quite certain he'd make a mess of it, ruin it for everyone. Couldn't invite that sort of censure on myself, you know."

"Perhaps the alternative, then," Frazin said. "Training, the normal channels of application . . ."

Kelexel had been prepared and sharpened for this task over a period long even to the Chem. The Primacy and the Bureau contained men who fed on suspicion, and they smarted under continued failure with Fraffin's case. Now, the tiny betrayals in Fraffin's manner, the patterned evasions and choice of words were summed up in the Investigator's awareness. There was illegality here, but none of the crimes they'd considered and discussed. Somewhere in Fraffin's private domain there was a dangerous something—odorous and profoundly offensive. What could it be?

"If it is permitted," Kelexel said, "I shall be happy to study your operation and make appropriate suggestions to my offspring. He will be delighted, I know, to hear that the great Director Fraffin granted me these few attentions."

And Kelexel thought: *Whatever your crime is, I'll find it. When I do, you'll pay, Fraffin; you'll pay the same as any other malefactor.*

"Very well, then," Fraffin said. He expected Kelexel to leave now, but the man remained, staring offensively across the desk.

"One thing, Kelexel said. "I know you achieve quite complex special effects with your creatures. The extreme care, the precision engineering of motives and

violence—I just wondered: Isn't it rather slow work?"

The casual ignorance of the question outraged Fraffin, but he sensed a warning in it and remembered Ynvic's words of caution.

"Slow?" he asked. "What's slow to people who deal with infinity?"

Ahh, Fraffin can be goaded, Kelexel thought as he read the signs of betrayal. *Good.* He said: "I merely wondered if . . . I hesitate to suggest it . . . but does not slowness equate with boredom?"

Fraffin sniffed. He'd thought at first this creature of the Bureau might be interesting but the fellow was beginning to pall. Fraffin pressed a button beneath his desk, the signal to get the new story under way. The sooner they were rid of this Investigator the better. All the preparations with the natives would help now. They'd play out their parts with rigorous nicety.

"I've offended you at last," Kelexel said, contrition in his voice.

"Have my stories bored you?" Fraffin asked. "If so, then I've offended you."

"Never!" Kelexel said. "So amusing, humorous. Such diversity."

Amusing, Fraffin thought. Humorous!

He glanced at the replay monitor in his desk, the strip of story

action in progress, shielded and displayed there only for his eyes. His crews already were getting to work. The time was ripe for death. His people knew the urgency.

His mind went down, down—immersed in the desk viewer, forgetting the Investigator, following the petty lives of the natives.

They are the finite and we the infinite, Fraffin thought: *Paradox: the finite provides unlimited entertainment for the infinite. With such poor creatures we insulate ourselves from lives that are endless serial events. Aii, Boredom! How you threaten the infinite.*

"How pliable your creatures are," Kelexel said, probing.

Such a bore, this clod, Fraffin thought. And he said: "I've just started a new story, a little gem."

"A new story?" Kelexel asked puzzled. "Is the war epic completed then?"

"I've cut off that story," Fraffin said. "It wasn't going well at all. Besides, wars are beginning to bore me. But personal conflict now—there's the thing!"

"Personal conflict?" Kelexel felt the idea was appalling.

"Ah, the intimacies of violence," Fraffin said. "Anyone can find drama in wars and migrations, in the rise and fall of civilizations and of religions—but what would you think of a little capsule of a story that focuses on a creature who slays its mate?"

Kelexel shook his head. The conversation had taken a turn that left him floundering. The war epic abandoned? A new story? Why? His forebodings returned. Was there a way Fraffin could harm a fellow Chem?

"Conflict and fear," Fraffin said. "Ahh, what a wide avenue into the susceptibilities these are."

"Yes . . . yes, indeed," Kelexel murmured.

"I touch a nerve," Fraffin said. "Greed here, a desire there, a whim in the other place—and fear. Yes, fear. When the creature's fully prepared, I arouse its fears. The whole mechanism performs for me then. They make themselves ill! They love! They hate! They cheat! They kill! They die."

Fraffin smiled—clenched teeth in the wide mouth. Kelexel found the expression menacing.

"And the most amusing part," Fraffin said, "the most *humorous* element is that they think they do it of and by themselves."

Kelexel forced an answering smile. Many time he'd laughed at this device in a Fraffin story, but now he found the idea something less than amusing. He swallowed, said: "But wouldn't such a story . . ."—he groped for the proper expression—" . . . be so . . . small?"

Small, Fraffin thought. Such a clown, this Kelexel.

"Is it not an ultimate artistry,"

Fraffin asked, "if I use a microscopic incident to show you immensity? I take the Forever-Now right here." He lifted a clenched fist, extended it toward Kelexel, opened it to show the palm. "I give you something you don't have—mortality."

Kelexel found the thought repellent—Fraffin and his grubby personal conflict, a slaying a petty crime. What a depressing idea. But Fraffin was absorbed once more in the shielded viewer on his desk. What did he see there?

"I fear I've overstayed my welcome," Kelexel ventured.

Fraffin jerked his gaze upward. The clod was going. Good. He wouldn't go far. The net already was prepared. What a fine, entangling mesh it had!

"The freedom of the ship is yours," Fraffin said.

"Forgive me if I've taken too much of your time," Kelexel said, rising.

Fraffin stood, bowed, made the conventional response: "What is time to the Chem?"

Kelexel murmured the formal reply: "Time is our toy." He turned, strode from the room, thoughts whirling in his mind. There was menace in Fraffin's manner. It had something to do with what he saw in that viewer. A story? How could a story menace a Chem?

Fraffin watched the door seal itself behind Kelexel, sank back

into his chair and returned his attention to the viewer. It was night up there on the surface now, and the crucial first incident was beginning to unfold.

A native killing its mate. He watched, fighting to maintain artistic distance. Subject female, appellation Murphey, a figure of staggering scarlet under artificial lights. The fog of all pretense was scorched from her features by the unexpected alien who had been her husband. She submitted her life now to formidable auguries of which she'd had not the slightest hint. The weirds and shades of her ancestral gods no longer awakened mysteries in her mind. The doomfire faces of superstition had lost their accustomed places.

With an abrupt, violent motion, Fraffin blanked out the viewer, put his hands to his face. Death had come to the creature. The story would go on of itself, now under its own momentum. What a way to trap a Chem!

Fraffin lowered his hands to the smooth cold surface of his desk. But who was trapped?

He felt himself stretched suddenly upon a rack of vision, sensed a frightened multitude within him—the whisperings of his own past without beginning.

What were we—once? he wondered.

There was the Chem curse: the infinite had no antiquities. Memory blurred off back there and one went to the artificial memory of

records and reels with all their inaccuracies.

What was lost there? he wondered. Did we have damned prophets with the sickness of butchery on their tongues, their words casting out the salt of fate? What spiced fantasy might we uncover in our lost beginnings? We've gods of our own making? How did we make them? Do we spit now upon our own dust as we laugh at my foolish, pliable natives?

He could not deflect the sudden swarming of his own past—like hungry beasts glowing in a sky he'd beheld once and which had terrorized him into hiding. As suddenly as they'd come, they were gone. The experience left him trembling. He stared at one of his own shaking hands.

I need distracting entertainment, he thought. Gods of Preservation! Even boredom's preferable to this!

Fraffin pushed himself away from his desk. How cold its edge felt against his hands! The room was suddenly a foreign place, its devices alien and hateful. The soft curves of his massage couch, still shaped to his body, caught his attention on the right, and he looked away quickly, repelled by the outline that was his own body's

I must do something rational, he thought.

With a determined effort, he stood, made his way across the room to the steely convolutions

of his pantovive reproducer. He slumped into its padded control seat, tuned the sensors directly to the planet surface up above. Satellite relays locked onto the machine's probes and he searched out the daylight hemisphere, looked for activity there among his creatures—anything in which to bury his awareness.

Land swam through the viewer stage, a wash of checkerboard outlines in green and yellows with here and there a chocolate brown. Highways . . . roads . . . the glittering amoeba shape of a city—he focused down into the streets and abruptly had a small crowd centered on the stage, the quarter-sized figures huddled like dolls at a corner. They were watching a pitchman, a weasel-faced little giant in a wrinkled grey suit and greasy hat. The native stood covertly alert behind a flimsy stand tray with transparent cover.

"Fleas!" the pitchman said, and his voice carried that intimate imperative of the natural confidence man. "Yes, that's what they are: fleas. But through an ancient and secret training method, I make them perform fantastic acrobatics and marvelous tricks for you. See this pretty girl dance. Here's a little woman who pulls a chariot. And this little girl leaps hurdles! They'll wrestle and race and romp for you! Step right up. Only one lira to look through the magnifying viewers and see these marvels!"

Do those fleas know they're someone's property? Fraffin wondered.

For Dr. Androcles Thurlow, it began with a telephone ringing in the night.

Thurlow's fumbling hand knocked the receiver to the floor. He spent a moment groping for it in the dark, still half asleep. His mind held trailing bits of a dream in which he relived the moments just before the blast at the Lawrence Radiation lab which had injured his eyes. It was a familiar dream that had begun shortly after the accident three months ago, but he felt that it now contained a new significance which he'd have to examine professionally.

Psychologist, heal thyself, he thought.

The receiver gave off a tinny voice which helped him locate it. He pressed it to his ear.

"Hullo." His voice carried a rasping sound in a dry mouth.

"Andy?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"This is Clint Mossman."

Thurlow sat up, swung his feet out of the bed. The rug felt cold against his soles. The luminous dial of his bedside clock showed 2:18 a.m. The time and the fact that Mossman was the County's chief criminal deputy sheriff could only mean an emergency. Mossman wanted Dr. Thurlow in his capacity as court psychologist.

"You there, Andy?"

"I'm here, Clint. What is it?"

"I'm afraid I have bad news, Andy. Your old girl friend's daddy just killed her mother."

For a moment, the words made no sense. *Old girl friend*. He had only one old girl friend here, but she was now married to someone else.

"It's Joe Morphew, Ruth Hudson's daddy," Mossman said.

"Oh, God," Thurlow muttered.

"I haven't much time," Mossman said. "I'm calling from a pay phone across the street from Joe's office building. He's holed up in his office and he has a gun. He says he'll only surrender to you."

Thurlow shook his head. "He wants to see me?"

"We need you down here right away, Andy. I know this is a tough one on you—Ruth and all, but I've no choice. I want to prevent a gun battle..."

"I warned you people something like this was going to happen," Thurlow said. He felt a sudden angry resentment against Mossman, the entire community of Moreno.

"I haven't time to argue with you," Mossman said. "I've told him you're coming. It shouldn't take more'n twenty minutes to get down here. Hurry it up, will you?"

"Sure, Clint. Right away."

Thurlow put the receiver back on the phone. He prepared himself for the pain of light, turned on the bedside lamp. His eyes

began to water immediately. He blinked rapidly, wondered if he'd ever again be able to experience sudden light without pain.

The realization of what Mossman had said began to grow. His mind felt numb. *Ruth! Where is Ruth?* But that wasn't his concern any more. That was Nev Hudson's problem. He began dressing, moving softly as he'd learned to do in the nights when his father was still alive.

He took his wallet from the night stand, found his wristwatch and buckled it onto his left wrist. The glasses, then—the special polarizing glasses with their adjustable lenses. His eyes relaxed as soon as he put them on. The light took on a sharply defined yellow cast. He looked up, caught a view of himself in the mirror: thin face, the dark glasses behind heavy black rims, black crewcut hair high at the temples, nose long with a slight bulge below the glasses, wide mouth with slightly thicker lower lip, Lincoln-esque chin, blue-shadowed and with divergent scar-like creases.

A drink was what he needed, but he knew he couldn't take the time. *Poor, sick Joe Murphey*, he thought. *God what a mess!*

Thurlow counted five sheriff's cars drawn up at an angle to the curb in front of the Murphey Building as he pulled to a stop across the street. Spotlights drew

patterns of erratic brilliance across the front of the three-storey building and the blue and white sign above the entrance: "J.H. MURPHEY COMPANY—FINE COSMETICS."

The lights reflected shards of brilliance off the sign. They hurt Thurlow's eyes. He slipped out on the curb side, searched for Mossman. Two furtive huddles of men crouched behind cars across the street.

Has Joe been shooting at them? Thurlow wondered.

He knew he was exposed to the dark windows of the building across there, but he felt none of the fragile loneliness he'd experienced in firefights across the rice paddies of the war. He felt it was impossible that Ruth's father could shoot at him. There'd been only one direction for the man to explode—and he'd already done that. Murphey was used up now, little more than a shell.

One of the officers across the street pushed a bull horn around the rear of a car, shouted into it: "Joe! You, Joe Murphey! Dr. Thurlow's here. Now, you come down out of there and give yourself up. We don't want to have to come in there shooting."

The amplified voice boomed and echoed between the buildings. In spite of the amplifier's distortions, Thurlow recognized Mossman's voice.

A second-floor window of the Murphey Building opened with a

chilling screech. Spotlight circles darted across the stone facing, centered the movement. A man's voice shouted from darkness behind the window: "No need to get rough, Clint. I see him over there. I'll be down in seven minutes." The window banged shut.

Thurlow ducked around his car, ran across to Mossman. The deputy was a bone-thin man in a sack-like tan suit and pale cream sombrero. He turned to reveal a narrow face full of craggy shadows from the spotlights' reflections.

"Hi, Andy," he said. "Sorry about this, but you see how it is."

"Has he been shooting?" Thurlow asked. He was surprised at the calmness of his own voice. *Professional training*, he thought. This was a psychotic crisis, and he was trained to handle such matters.

"No, but he's got a gun all right," Mossman said. The deputy's voice sounded weary and disgusted.

"You plan to give him his seven minutes?"

"Should we?"

"I think so. I think he'll do exactly what he said he'll do. He'll come down and give himself up."

"Seven minutes and no more then."

"Did he say why he wanted to see me?

"Something about Ruth and

he's afraid we'll shoot him if you're not here."

"Is that what he said?"

"Yeah."

"He's living in a rather involved fantasy, that's clear," Thurlow said. "Perhaps I should go up and . . ."

"I'm afraid I can't risk giving him a hostage."

Thurlow sighed.

"You're here," Mossman said. "That's what he asked for. I'll go along with . . ."

A radio speaker in the car beside them emitted a clangling sound, then: "Car nine."

Mossman leaned into the car, put the microphone to his mouth, thumbed the button: "This is car nine, over."

Thurlow looked around, recognized some of the officers sheltered behind the cars. He nodded to the ones who met his gaze, finding it odd how familiar and yet unfamiliar the men appeared, their faces dim in the polarized light which his lenses admitted. They were men he saw frequently in the courthouse, men he knew by first name, but now there was a part of them exposed that he'd never before seen.

A metallic crackling came from Mossman's radio. Then: "Jack wants to know your ten-oh-eight, car nine. Over."

Has Ruth heard yet? Thurlow wondered. Who'll break this to her . . . and how?

"Murphy's still up there in his

office," Mossman said. "Dr. Thurlow's here now, and Murphey says he'll give himself up in seven minutes. We're going to wait him out. Over."

"Okay, Car nine. Jack's on his way with four more men. Sheriff's still out at the house with the Coroner. Sheriff says don't take any chances. Use gas if you have to. Time is two forty-six; over."

"Car nine is seven-oh-five," Mossman said. "Over and out." He hung the microphone in its rack, turned back to Thurlow. "What a sweet mess!" He pushed his cream sombrero back from his forehead.

"There's no doubt he killed Adele?" Thurlow asked.

"No doubt."

"Where?"

"At their house."

"How?"

"Knife—that big souvenir thing he was always waving at barbecues."

Thurlow took a deep breath. It fitted the pattern, of course. A knife was the sickly logical weapon. He forced himself to professional calmness, asked: "When?"

"About midnight near as we can figure. Somebody called an ambulance, but they didn't think to notify us for almost half an hour. By the time we got on it, Joe was gone."

"So you came down here looking for him?"

"Something like that."

Thurlow shook his head. As he moved, one of the spotlights shifted, and he thought he saw an object hanging in the air outside Murphey's window. He jerked his attention upward, and the object appeared to flow backward up into the dark sky. Thurlow removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes. Strange thing—it had looked like a long tube. An after effect from the injury of his eyes, he thought, and replaced the glasses. returned his attention to Mossman.

"What's Joe doing in there?" Thurlow asked. "Any idea?"

"Calling people on the telephone, bragging about what he's done. His secretary, Nella Hartnick, had to be taken to the hospital in hysterics."

"Has he called . . . Ruth?"

"Dunno."

Thurlow thought about Ruth then, really focused on her for the first time since she'd sent back his ring with the polite little note (so unlike her, that note) telling of her marriage to Nev Hudson. Thurlow had been in Denver on the Fellowship grant that had come to him through the National Science Foundation.

What a fool I was, he thought. That grant wasn't worth losing Ruth.

He wondered if he should call her, try to break this news to her as gently as possible. But he knew there was no gentle way to break this news. It had to be done

swiftly, cruel and sharp. A clean wound that would heal with as small a scar as possible. . .under the circumstances.

Moreno being the small town it was, he knew Ruth had kept her job after her marriage—night shift psychiatric nurse at the County Hospital. She'd be at the hospital now. A telephone call would be too impersonal, he knew. It'd have to be done in person.

And I'd be irrevocably associated with the tragedy, he thought. *I don't want that.*

Thurlow realized then that he was daydreaming, trying to hold onto something of what he and Ruth had known together. He sighed. Let someone else break the news to her. She was someone else's responsibility now.

An officer on Thurlow's right said: "Think he's drunk?"

"Is he ever sober?" Mossman asked.

The first officer asked: "You see the body?"

"No," Mossman said, "but Jack described it when he called me."

"Just gi'me one good shot at the sonofabitch," the first officer muttered.

And now it starts, Thurlow thought.

He turned as a car pulled to a screeching stop across the street. Out of it jumped a short fat man, his pants pulled on over pajamas. The man carried a camera with strobe light.

Thurlow whirled away from the light as the man crouched and aimed the camera. The strobe light flared in the canyon of the street . . . and again.

Expecting the glare, Thurlow had looked up at the sky to avoid the reflected light and its pain on his injured eyes. As the strobe flashed, he saw the strange object once more. It was hanging in the air about ten feet out of Murphrey's window. Even after the flare of light, the thing remained visible as a dim shape, almost cloudlike.

Thurlow stared, entranced. This couldn't be an illusion or after effect of the eye injury. The shape was quite definite, real. It appeared to be a cylinder about twenty feet long and four or five feet in diameter. A semi-circular shelf like a Ubangi lip projected from the end nearest the building. Two figures crouched on the lip. They appeared to be aiming a small stand-mounted tube at Murphrey's window. The figures were indistinct in the fog-like outline, but they appeared human—two arms, two legs—although small: perhaps only three feet tall.

Thurlow felt an odd sense of detached excitement at the vision. He knew he was seeing something real whose strangeness defied explanation. As he stared, one of the figures turned, looked full at him. Thurlow saw the glow of eyes through the cloud-blurring.

The figure nudged its companion. Now, both of them peered down at Thurlow—two pairs of glowing eyes.

Is it some form of mirage? he wondered.

Thurlow tried to swallow in a dry throat. A mirage could be seen by anyone. Mossman, standing beside him, was staring up at Murphey's window. The deputy couldn't help but see that odd cylinder there—or the vision of it—but he gave no sign.

The photographer came panting up to them. Thurlow knew the man: Tom Lee from the *Sentinel*.

"Is Murphey still in there?" Lee asked.

"That's right," Mossman said.

"Hi, Dr. Thurlow," Lee said. "What you staring at? Is that the window where Murphey's holed up?"

Thurlow grabbed Lee's shoulder. The two creatures on the cylinder had returned to their tube and were pointing it down toward the crowd of officers. Thurlow pointed toward them, aware of a strong musky smell of cologne from the photographer.

"Tom, what the devil is that up there?" Thurlow asked. "Get a picture of it."

Lee turned with his camera, looked up. "What? Picture of what?"

"That thing outside Murphey's window."

"What thing?"

"Don't you see something hovering just out from that window?"

"A bunch of gnats, maybe. Lots of 'em this year. They always collect like that where there's light."

"Huh? Well . . ."

Thurlow yanked off his polarized glasses. The cloudlike cylinder disappeared. In its place was a vague, foggy shape with tiny movements in it. He could see the corner of the building through it. He replaced the glasses. Again, there was a cylinder with two figures on a lip projecting from it. The figures were now pointing their tube toward the building's entrance.

"There he comes!" It was a shout from their left.

Lee almost knocked Thurlow down pushing past Mossman to aim the camera at the building's entrance. Officers surged forward.

Thurlow stood momentarily alone as a short, stocky, partly bald man in a blue suit appeared in the spotlight glare at the street doors of the Murphey Building. The man threw one hand across his eyes as the spotlights centered on him and the strobelight flared. Thurlow blinked in the glare of light. His eyes watered.

Deputies engulfed the man at the doors.

Lee darted off to one side, lifted the camera overhead, pointing it down at the milling group.

"Let me see his face!" Lee called.
"Open up there a little."

But the officers ignored him.
Again, the strobe flared.

Thurlow had one more glimpse of the captive—small eyes blinking in a round florid face. How curiously intense the eyes—unafraid. They stared out at the psychologist, recognizing him.

"Andy!" Murphey shouted.
"Take care of Ruthey! You hear?
Take care of Ruthey!"

Murphey became a jerking bald spot hustled along in a crowd of hats. He was pushed into a car off near the corner on the right. Lee still hovered on the outskirts, firing his strobe light.

Thurlow took a shuddering breath. There was a sense of charged air around him, a pack smell mingled with exhaust gases as the cars were started. Belatedly, he remembered the cylinder at the window, looked up in time to see it lift away from the building, fade into the sky.

There was a nightmare feeling to the vision, the noise, the shouted orders around him.

A deputy paused beside Thurlow, said: "Clint says thanks. He says you can talk to Joe in a couple hours—after the D.A. gets through with him, or in the morning if you'd rather."

Thurlow wet his lips with his tongue. There was an acid taste in his throat. He said: "I . . . in the morning, I think. I'll check

with the probation department for an appointment."

"Isn't going to be much pre-trial nonsense about this case," the deputy said. "I'll tell Clint what you said." He got into the car beside Thurlow.

Lee came up, the camera now on a strap around his neck. He held a notebook in his left hand, a stub of pencil in his right.

"Hey, Doc," he said, "is that right what Mossman said? Murphey wouldn't come out until you got here?"

Thurlow nodded, stepped aside as the patrol car backed out beside him. The question sounded completely inane, something born of the same kind of insanity that left him standing here in the street as cars sped off around the corner in a wake of motor sounds. The smell of unburned gas was sharp and stinging in his nostrils.

Lee scribbled in the notebook.

"Weren't you pretty friendly with Murphey's daughter once?" Lee asked.

"We're friends," Thurlow said. The mouth that spoke the words seemed to belong to someone else.

"You see the body?" Lee asked.
Thurlow shook his head.

"What a sweet, bloody mess," Lee said.

Thurlow wanted to say:
"You're a sweet, bloody pig!"
but his voice wouldn't obey him.
Adele Murphey . . . a body. Bod-

ies in crimes of violence tended toward an ugly sameness: the sprawl, the red wetness, the dark wounds . . . the professional detachment of police as they recorded and measured and questioned. Thurlow could feel his own professional detachment deserting him. This body that Lee mentioned with such avid concern for the story, this body was a person Thurlow had known—mother of the woman he'd loved . . . still loved.

Thurlow admitted this to himself now, remembering Adele Murphey, the calmly amused looks from eyes so like Ruth's . . . and the measuring stares that said she was wondering what kind of husband he'd make for her daughter. But that was dead, too. That had died first.

"Doc, what was it you thought you saw up by that window?" Lee asked.

Thurlow looked down at the fat little man, the thick lips, the probing, wise little eyes, and thought what the reaction would be to a description of that *thing* hovering outside Murphey's window. Involuntarily, Thurlow glanced up at the window. The space was empty now. The night had grown suddenly cold. Thurlow shivered.

"Was Murphey looking out?" Lee asked.

The man's voice carried an irritating country twang that rasped on Thurlow's nerves.

"No," Thurlow said. "I . . . I guess I just saw a reflection."

"I don't know how you can see anything through those glasses," Lee said.

"You're right," Thurlow said. "It was the glasses, my eyes—a reflection."

"I've a lot more questions, Doc," Lee said. "You wanna stop up at Turk's Nightery where we can be comfortable? We can go in my car and I'll bring . . ."

"No," Thurlow said. He shook his head, feeling the numbness pass. "No. Maybe tomorrow."

"Hell, Doc, it *is* tomorrow."

But Thurlow turned away, ran across the street to his car. His mind had come fully to focus on Murphey's words: "*Take care of Ruthey.*"

Thurlow knew he had to find Ruth, offer any help he could. She was married to someone else, but that didn't end what had been between them.

The audience stirred, a single organism in the anonymous darkness of the storyship's *empa-theater*.

Kelexel, seated near the center of the giant room, felt that oddly menacing dark movement. They were all around him, the story cadre and off-duty crewmen interested in Frazin's new production. They had seen two reels run and re-run a dozen times while their elements were refined.

They waited now for another rerun of the opening scene, and still Kelexel sensed that threatening aura in this place. It was personal and direct, something to do with the *story* but he couldn't define it.

He could smell now the faint bite of ozone from the sensi-mesh web, that offshoot of Tiggy-waugh's discovery, whose invisible field linked the audience to the story projection. His chair felt strange. It was professional equipment with solid arms and keyed flanges for the editing record. Only the vast domed ceiling with its thread of pantovive force focusing down, down onto the stage far below him (and the stage itself)—these were familiar, like any normal empatheater.

But the sounds, the clicks of editing keys, professional comments—"Shorten that establishment and get to the close-up . . ." "Hit the olfactory harder as soon as you have light . . ." "Soften that first breeze effect . . ." "Amplify the victim's opening emotion and cut back immediately . . ."

All this continued to be discord.

Kelexel had spent two working days in here, privileged to watch the cadre at its chores. Still, the sounds and voices of the audience remained discord. His previous experience of empatheaters had always involved

completed stories and rapt watchers.

Far off to his left in the darkness, a voice said: "Roll it."

The pantovive force lines disappeared. Utter blackness filled the room.

Someone cleared his throat. Clearing throats became a message of nervousness that wove out through the dark.

Light came into being at the center of the stage. Kelexel squirmed into a more comfortable position. Always, that same odd beginning, he thought. The light was a forlorn, formless thing that resolved slowly into a street lamp. It illuminated a slope of lawn, a curved length of driveway and in the background the ghost-grey wall of a native house. The dark windows of primitive glass glistened like strange eyes.

There was a panting noise somewhere in the scene and something thudding with a frenzied rhythm.

An insect chirred.

Kelexel felt the realism of the sounds as pantovive circuits reproduced them with all the values of the original. To sit enmeshed in the web, linked to the empathic projectors, was a real as viewing the original raw scene from a vantage point above and to one side. It was in its own way, like the Chem oneness. The smell of dust from wind-stirred dry grass permeated Kelexel's awareness.

A cool finger of breeze touched his face.

Terror crept through Kelexel then. It reached out from the shadowy scene and through the web's projectors with a billowing insistence. Kelexel had to remind himself that this was story artistry, that it wasn't real . . . for him. He was experiencing another creature's fear caught and preserved on sensitive recorders.

A running figure, a native woman clad in a loose green gown that billowed around her thighs, fled into the focus of the stage. She gasped and panted as she ran. Her bare feet thudded on the lawn and then on the paving of the driveway. Pursuing her came a squat, moon-faced man carrying a sword whose blade like a silvery snaketrack glittered in the light of the streetlamp.

Terror radiated from the woman. She gasped: "No! Please dear God, no!"

Kelexel held his breath. No matter the number of times he had seen this, the act of violence felt new each time. He was beginning to see what Fraffin might have in this story. The sword was lifted high overhead . . .

"Cut!"

The web went blank, no emotion, nothing. It was like being dropped off a cliff. The stage darkened.

Kelexel realized then the voice had been Fraffin's. It had come

from far down to the right. A momentary rage at Fraffin's action surged through Kelexel. It required a moment for the Investigator to re-orient himself, and still he felt frustrated.

Lights came on revealing the rising wedge of seats converging on the disc of stage. Kelexel blinked, stared around him at the story cadre. He could still feel the meance from them and from that empty stage. What was the threat here? he wondered. He trusted his instincts in this: there was danger in this room. But *what* was it?

The cadre sat around him row on row—trainees and off-duty crewmen at the rear, probationers and specialist observers in the center, the editing crew down near the stage. Taken individually, they appeared such ordinary Chem, but Kelexel remembered what he had felt in the dark—that oneness, an organism bent on harming him, *confident* of its ability to harm him. He could sense it in the Chem empathy—the all-one-life they shared.

There was an odd stillness to the room now. They were waiting for something. Far down near the stage heads bent together in inaudible conversation.

Am I imagining things? Kelexel wondered. But surely they must suspect me. Why then do they permit me to sit in here and watch them work?

The work—that violent death. Again, Kelexel felt frustration at the way Fraffin had cut off that scene. To have the vision denied him even when he knew how it went . . . Kelexel shook his head. He felt confused, excited. Once more he swept his gaze over the cadre. They were a gaming board of colors in the giant room, the hue of each uniform coded to its wearer's duties—red patches of flitter pilots, the motley orange and black of shooting crewmen, green of story continuity, yellow of servicing and repair, purple of acting and white of wardrobe, and here and there the black punctuation marks of Manipulators, sub-directors, Fraffin's inner circle.

The group near the stage broke apart. Fraffin emerged, climbed up onto the stage and to the very center, the bare circle of image focus. It was a deliberate move which identified him with the action which had occupied that space only moments before.

Kelexel bent forward to study the Director. Fraffin was a gaunt little figure down there in his black cloak, a patch of ebony hair above silver skin, the gashed straight-edge of mouth with its deep upper lip. He was suddenly something from the shadowy marches of a far and perilous realm that no other Chem had ever glimpsed. There was an arresting individuality to him.

The sunken eyes looked up and searched out Kelexel.

A chill went through the Investigator then. He sat back, his thoughts boiling with alarm. It was as though Fraffin had spoken to him, saying: "*There's the foolish Investigator! There he is, ensnared in my net, trapped! Safely caught! Oh, certainly caught!*"

Silence gripped the empatheater now like a held breath. The intent faces of the cadre focused on the image stage.

"I will tell you once more," Fraffin said, and his voice caressed the air. "Our aim is subtlety."

Again, Fraffin looked up at Kelexel.

Now, he has felt terror, Faffin thought. Fear heightens the sex drive. And he has seen the victim's daughter, a female of the kind to snare a Chem—exotic, not too gross, graceful, eyes like strange green jewels. Ah, how the Chem love green. She is sufficiently similar to other non-Chem pleasure creatures that he will sense new physical excitements in her. Ah, hah, Kelexel! You will ask to examine a native soon—and we'll permit it.

"You are not keeping the viewer sufficiently in mind," Faffin said. His voice had turned suddenly cold.

A shiver of agitation swept up through the empatheater.

"We must not make our view-

er feel too deep a terror," Fraf-fin said. "Only let him know terror is present. Don't force the experience. Let him enjoy it—amusing violence, humorous death. The viewer must not think *he* is the one being manipulated. There is more here than a pattern of intrigue for our own enjoyment."

Kelexel sensed unspoken messages in Fraffin's words. A definite threat, yes. He felt the play of emotions around him and wondered at them.

I must get one of these natives to examine intimately and at my leisure, Kelexel thought. *Perhaps there's a clue that only a native can reveal.*

As though this thought were a key to the locked door of temptation, Kelexel found his mind suddenly filled with thoughts about a female from Fraffin's story. The name, such an exotic sound—Ruth. Red-haired Ruth. There was something of the Subi-creatures about her, and the Subi were famous for the erotic pleasures they gave the Chem. Kelexel remembered a Subi he had owned once. She had seemed to fade so rapidly, though. Mortals had a way of doing that when paced by the endless life of a Chem.

Perhaps I could examine this Ruth, Kelexel thought. *It'd be a simple matter for Fraffin's men to bring her to me here.*

"Subtlety," Fraffin said. "The audience must be maintained in a detached awareness. Think of

our story as a form of dance, not real in the way *our* lives are real, but an interesting reflection, a Chem fairy story. By now, you all must know the purpose of our story. See that you hew to that purpose with proper subtlety."

Fraffin drew his black cloak around him with a feeling of amusement at the showmanship of the gesture. He turned his back on the audience, stalked off the stage.

It was a good crew, Fraffin reminded himself. They would play their parts with trained exactitude. This amusing little story would accumulate on the reels. It might even be saleable as an interlude piece, a demonstration of artistic deftness. But no matter; it would serve its purpose if it did no more than lead Kelexel around—a fear here, a desire there—his every move recorded by the shooting crews. Every move.

He's as easy to manipulate as the natives, Fraffin thought.

He let himself out through the service tube at the rear of the stage, emerged into the blue walls of the drop hall that curved down past the storage bays to his quarters. Fraffin allowed the drop field to catch him and propel him past the seamless projections of hatchways in a gentle blur.

It's almost possible to feel sorry for Kelexel, he thought.

The man had been so obviously

repelled at first confrontation with the idea of single violence, but oh, how he'd lost himself in the native conflict when shown it.

We identify with individual acts of violence so easily, Fraffin thought. *One might almost suspect there were real experiences of this kind in our own pasts.*

He felt the reflexive tightening of the armor that was his skin, a sudden turmoil of unfixed memories. Faffrin swallowed, halted the drop at the hatchway outside his salon.

The endlessness of his own personal *story* appalled him suddenly. He felt himself to be on the brink of frightening discoveries and feared the monsters of awareness that lurked in the eternity before him. *Things* were there that he didn't want to see.

A pleading rage suffused Fraf-fin then. He wanted to slam a fist into eternity, to still the hidden voices gibbering at him. He felt himself go still with fear and he thought: *To be immortal is to require frequent administrations of moral anesthesia.*

It was such an odd thought that it dispelled his fear. He let himself into the silvery warmth of his salon wondering whence that thought had come.

Thurlow sat smoking his pipe, hunched over the wheel of his parked car. His polarizing glasses lay on the seat beside him, and he stared at the evening sky

through raindrops luminous on the windshield. His eyes watered and the raindrops blurred like tears. The car was a five-year-old coupe and he knew he needed a new one, but he'd fallen into the habit of saving his money to buy a house . . . when he'd thought of marrying Ruth. The habit was difficult to break now, although he knew he clung to it mostly out of perverse hope that the past year yet might be erased from their lives.

Why does she want to see me? he wondered. *And why here, where we used to meet? Why such secrecy now?*

It had been two days since the murder, and he found he still couldn't assemble the events of the period into a coherent whole. Where news stories mentioned his own involvement, those stories read like something written about a stranger—their meaning as blurred as the raindrops in front of him now. Thurlow felt that his whole world was touched with Joe Murphey's psychotic ramblings and the violent reactions of the community.

It shocked Thurlow to realize that the community wanted Murphey dead. Public reaction was as violent as the storm that had just passed.

Violent storm, he thought. *A violence storm.*

He looked up at the trees on his left, wondering how long he'd been here. His watch had stopped,

unwound. Ruth was late, though. It was her way.

There'd been the storm. Clouds had grown out of a hard grey sky with rain crouched low in them. For a time the eucalyptus grove around him had been filled with frightened bird sounds. A wind had hummed through the high boughs—then the rain: big spattering drops.

The sun was back now, low in the west, casting orange light onto the treetops. The leaves drooped with hanging raindrops. A mist near the ground quested among scaly brown trunks. Insect cries came from the roots and the bunchgrass that grew in open places along the dirt road into the grove.

What do they remember of their storm? Thurlow wondered.

He knew professionally why the community wanted its legal lynching, but to see the same attitude in the legal officials, this was the shocker for Thurlow. He thought about the delays being placed in his path, the attempts to prevent his own professional examination of Murphey. The Sheriff, District Attorney George Paret, all the authorities knew by now that Thurlow had predicted the psychotic break which had cost Adele Murphey her life. If they recognized this as a fact, Murphey had to be judged insane and couldn't be executed.

Paret already had shown his hand by calling in Thurlow's own

department chief, the Moreno State Hospital director of psychiatry, Dr. LeRoi Whelye. Whelye was known throughout the state as a hanging psychiatrist, a man who always found what the prosecution wanted. Right on schedule, Whelye had declared Murphey to be sane and "responsible for his acts."

Thurlow looked at his useless wristwatch. It was stopped at 2:14. He knew it must be closer to seven now. It would be dark soon. What was keeping Ruth? Why had she asked him to meet her in their old trysting place?

He felt suddenly contaminated by this way of meeting.

Am I ashamed to see her openly now? he asked himself.

Thurlow had come directly from the hospital and Whelye's unsubtle attempts to get him to step aside from this case, to forget for the moment that he was also the county's court psychologist.

The words had been direct: ". . . personal involvement . . . your old girl friend . . . her father . . ." The meaning was clear, but underneath lay the awareness that Whelye, too, knew about that report on Murphey which rested now in the Probation Department's files. And that report contradicted Whelye's public stand.

Whelye had come up just as they were about to go into a Ward Team conference to consider the

possible discharge of a patient. Thurlow thought of that conference now, sensing how it encapsulated the chief of psychiatry.

They'd been in the ward office with its smell of oiled floors and disinfectant—the Protestant chaplain, a small sandy-haired man whose dark suits always seemed too large and made him appear even smaller, the ward nurse, Mrs. Norman, heavy, grey-haired, busty, a drill sergeant's rocky face with cap always set squarely on her head; Dr. Whelye, an impression of excess bulk in a tweed suit, iron grey at the temples and in patches through his black hair, a sanitary and barber-scraped appearance to his pink cheeks, and a look of calculated reserve in his washed blue eyes.

Lastly, almost something to overlook around the scarred oval table, there'd been the patient: a number and a first name, Peter. He was seventeen, a mentality limited by lack of the right genes, lack of opportunity, lack of education, lack of proper nutrition. He was a walking *lack*, blond hair slicked down, veiled blue eyes, a narrow nose and pointed chin, a pursed up little mouth, as though everything about him had to be shelled up inside and guarded.

Outside it had been green lawns, sunshine and patients preparing the flower beds for spring. Inside, Thurlow felt, there had been little more than the patient's

smell of fear with Whelye conducting the interview like a district attorney.

"What kind of work are you going to do when you get out?" Whelye asked.

Peter, keeping his eyes on the table—"Sell newspapers or shine shoes, something like that."

"Can't make any money like that unless you have a big corner stand, and then you're in big business," Whelye said.

Watching this, Thurlow wondered why the psychiatrist would suppress ideas instead of trying to draw the boy out. He asked himself then what Whelye would do if he, Thurlow, should stop the proceedings and take the patient's place to describe "a thing I saw the other night, something like a flying saucer. It was interested in a murderer."

Mrs. Norman had Peter's social service files on the table in front of her. She leafed through them, obviously not paying much attention to Whelye. The chaplain, Hardwicke, had taken Thurlow's own psychometry file on Peter, but wasn't studying it. He seemed to be interested in the play of a sprinkler visible out of the window at his right.

"Could you tell us your general attitude today, Peter?" Whelye asked. "How do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Are you still working in the sewing room? Seems to me you'd

be more interested in that kind of work outside."

"Yes, I'm working there. I've been working there ever since I came."

"How long have you been here?"

"Pert' near two years now."

"How do you like it here?"

"Oh, it's all right. But I been wondering when you're going to let me out . . . so I can get back home an' help support my mother."

"Well, that's one thing we have you in here for," Whelye said, "so we can think it over."

"Well, that's what they been telling me for six months now," Peter said. "Why do I have to stay here? The Chaplain (Peter shot a covert glance at Hardwicke) told me you were going to write my mother to see if she wanted me home. An' if she did want me home, he'd take me down there."

"We haven't heard from your mother yet."

"Well, I got a letter from my mother an' she says she wants me home. The Chaplain said if you'd let me go, he'd take me home. So I don't see any reason why I can't go."

"It's not a simple decision, Peter. It's not just the Chaplain's decision."

Hardwicke opened the psychometry file, made a pretense of studying it. Thurlow sighed, shook his head.

What was that thing I saw? Thurlow wondered. *Was it real there beside Murphey's window?* *Was it illusion?* The question had been plaguing him for two days.

"Well, he said he'd take me," Peter said.

Whelye stared at Hardwicke, disapproval on his face. "Did you say you'd take him down to Mariposa?"

"If he were discharged," Hardwick said. "I said I'd be glad to give him the trip down there."

Whelye faced Peter, said: "Well, we have to do some more looking into this matter, generally to find out if your mother wants you and if the Chaplain's schedule will allow him to take you down there. If all these things work out, we'll let you go."

Peter was sitting very still now, no emotion on his face, his gaze intent upon his hands. "Thank you."

"That's all, Peter," Whelye said. "You can go now."

Mrs. Norman signaled an attendant waiting at the screened window to the Common Room. The attendant opened the door. Peter got up and hurried out.

Thurlow sat for a moment, the realization growing in him that Peter had taken away what amounted to a promise to be released, but that because of the way he had conducted the conference, Whelye wasn't aware of this. Whelye would be thinking

that all the "ifs" involved made this a hypothetical case.

"Well, Dr. Whelye," Thurlow said, "you've made a definite commitment to this patient to discharge him—promptly."

"Oh, no—I didn't promise I'd discharge him."

"Well, the patient certainly understood he'd be home in short order—and the only qualifications are Chaplain Hardwicke's schedule and confirmation of the mother's letter."

"Call the patient back, and we'll settle this with him right now," Whelye said. He looked angry.

Mrs. Norman sighed, went to the Common Room door, signaled an attendant. Peter was brought back and returned to his chair. The boy kept his eyes down, shoulders bent, unmoving.

"You understand, don't you, Peter," Whelye asked, "that we haven't made any definite promise to discharge you? We're going to look into your home situation and see if everything is all right and if you can get a job. We'd also like to look into the possibility of you returning to school for a year or so. Perhaps you could get a better job. You understand, don't you, that we aren't making any definite commitment?"

"Yeah, I understand." Peter looked at Chaplain Hardwicke who refused to meet the boy's gaze.

"What's this about school?" Thurlow asked.

"The boy hasn't finished high school," Whelye said. He faced Peter. "Wouldn't you like to go back and finish high school?"

"Yeah."

"Do you like to go to school?" Whelye asked.

"Yeah."

"Wouldn't you like to finish your education and get a job where you could pay your own way and save money and get married?"

"Yeah."

Whelye glanced triumphantly at Thurlow. "Anybody got any questions?"

Thurlow had slowly been building up in his mind the analogy of a stud poker game. Peter was in the position of a player who didn't believe anything happening here, nor did he *disbelieve* anything. He was waiting to see the rest of the cards.

"Isn't it true, Peter," Thurlow asked, "that you'd rather be hungry than on a full stomach?"

"Yeah." The boy had turned his attention to Whelye now.

"Isn't it true, Peter," Thurlow asked, "that you'd rather eat a dry crust of bread than have a nice juicy piece of meat on your dinner plate?"

"Yeah."

"That's all," Thurlow said.

At Mrs. Norman's signal, the attendant took Peter once more from the room.

"I think when we get to the next patient," Thurlow said, "we should swear him in like they do in court."

Whelye remained silent for a moment. He shuffled his papers, then: "I don't see what you're driving at."

"You reminded me of a district attorney of my acquaintance," Thurlow said.

"Oh?" Whelye's eyes blazed with anger.

"By the way," Thurlow said, "do you believe in flying saucers?"

The heads of both Mrs. Norman and Chaplain Hardwicke snapped up. They stared at Thurlow. Whelye, however, drew back, his eyes veiled, watchful.

"What is the meaning of that question?" Whelye demanded.

"I'd like to know your position," Thurlow said.

"On flying saucers?" There was cautious disbelief in Whelye's tone.

"Yes."

"They're delusional material," Wheye said. "Utter nonsense. Oh, there could be a few cases of mistaken identity, weather balloons and that sort of thing, but the people who insist they've seen spaceships, these people are in need of our services."

"A sound opinion," Thurlow said. "I'm glad to hear it."

Whelye nodded. "I don't care what you think of my methods," he said, "but you're not going

to find my opinions based on delusional material—of *any* type. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear," Thurlow said. He saw that Whelye was convinced the question had carried a subtle intent to discredit.

Whelye got to his feet, glanced at his watch. "I fail to see the point in all this, but doubtless you had some idea in mind." He left the room.

Mrs. Norman took a deep breath, bent a look of sympathy on Thurlow. "You like to play with fire, evidently," she said.

Thurlow stood up, smiled.

Hardwicke, catching Thurlow's eyes, said: "The defense rests."

As the scene passed through his mind, Thurlow shook his head. Again, he glanced at his wrist-watch, smiled at himself as the unconscious gesture displayed the stopped hands. The air coming in the car window smelled of wet leaves.

Why did Ruth ask me to meet her here? She's another man's wife now. Where is she—so damned late! Could something have happened to her?

He looked at his pipe.

Damned pipe's gone out. Always going out. I smoke matches, not tobacco. Hate to burn myself with this woman again. Poor Ruth—tragedy, tragedy. She was very close to her mother.

He tried to remember the murdered woman. Adele Murphey

was photographs and descriptions in stories now, a reflection from the words of witnesses and police. The Adele Murphey he'd known refused to come out from behind the brutal new images. Her features were beginning to grow dim in the leaf whirl of things that fade. His mind held only the police pictures now—color photos in the file at the Sheriff's office—the red hair (so much like the daughter's) fanned out on an oil-stained driveway.

Her bloodless skin in the photo—he remembered that.

And he remembered the words of the witness, Sarah French, the doctor's wife from next door, words on a deposition. Through Mrs. French's words, he could almost visualize that violent scene. Sarah French had heard shouting, a scream. She'd looked out of her second floor bedroom window onto moon-flooded night just in time to see the murder.

"Adele . . . Mrs. Murphey came running out of her back door. She was wearing a green nightgown . . . very thin. She was barefooted. I remember thinking how odd: she's barefooted. Then Joe was right behind her. He had that damned Malay kris. It looked horrible, horrible. I could see his face . . . the moonlight. He looked like he always looks when he's angry. He has such a terrible temper!"

Sarah's words—Sarah's words . . . Thurlow could almost see that

zig-zag blade glinting in Joe Murphey's hand, a vicious, shivering, wavering thing in the mottled shadows. It had taken Joe no more than ten steps to catch his wife. Sarah had counted the blows.

"I just stood there counting each time he struck her. I don't know why. I just counted. Seven times. Seven times."

Adele had sprawled onto the concrete, her hair spreading in that uneven splash which the cameras later recorded. Her knees had drawn up into a foetal curve, then straightened.

And all that time, the doctor's wife had been standing there at the upstairs window, left hand to mouth, her flesh a rigid, mortal concrete.

"I couldn't move. I couldn't even speak. All I could do was just watch him."

Joe Murphey's oddly thin-wristed right hand had come up, hurled the kris in a short arc onto the lawn. Unhurriedly, he had walked around his wife's body, avoided the spreading patch of red that trailed down the concrete. Apparently, he'd merged with the shadows of trees where the driveway entered the street. Sarah had heard a motor start. Its lights had flashed on. The car had roared away in a gritty scattering of gravel.

Then, and only then, Sarah had found she could move. She'd called an ambulance.

"Andy?"

The voice brought Thurlow back from a far distance. *Ruth's voice?* he wondered. He turned.

She stood at his left just behind the car, a slender woman in a black silk suit that smoothed her full curves. Her red hair, usually worn close around her oval face, was tied in a severe coil at the back of her neck. The hair bound so tightly—Thurlow tried to put out of his mind all memory of the mother's hair spread on the driveway.

Ruth's green eyes stared at him with a look of hurt expectancy. She had the appearance of a tired elf.

Thurlow opened his door, slipped out to the wet grass beside the road.

"I didn't hear your car," he said.

"I've been staying with Sarah, living with her. I walked up from the house. That's why I'm so late."

He could hear the tears in her voice and wondered at the inanity of their conversation.

"Ruth . . . damn it all! I don't know what to say." Without thinking about it, he crossed to her, took her in his arms. He could feel her muscles resisting him. "I don't know what to say."

She pulled out of his embrace. "Then . . . don't say anything. It's all been said anyway." She looked up at his eyes. "Aren't

you still wearing your special glasses?"

"To hell with my glasses. Why wouldn't you speak to me on the phone? Was that Sarah's number they gave me at the hospital?" Her words were coming back to him—". . . living with her." What did it mean?

"Father said . . ." She bit her lower lip, shook her head. "Andy, oh, Andy, he's insane and they're going to execute him . . ." She looked up at Thurlow, her lashes wet with tears. "Andy, I don't know how to feel about him. I don't know . . ."

Again, he took her in his arms. She came willingly this time. How familiar and right it felt for her to be there. She began to sob gently against his shoulder. Her crying felt like the spent aftermath of sorrow.

"Oh, I wish you could take me away from here," she whispered.

What was she saying? he asked himself. She was no longer Ruth Murphey. She was Mrs. Neville Hudson. He wanted to push her away, start throwing questions at her. But that wouldn't be professional, not the right *psychological* thing to do. He decided it wasn't what he wanted to do after all. Still, she was another man's wife. Damn! Damn! Damn! What had happened? The fight. He remembered their fight—the night he'd told her about the Fellowship grant. She hadn't wanted him to take it, to be separated for

a year. Denver had sounded so far away in her words. '*It's only a year.*' He could hear his own voice saying it. '*You think more of your damn' career than you do of me!*' The temper matched her hair.

He'd left on that sour note. His letters had gone into a void—unanswered. She'd been 'not home' to his telephone calls. And he'd learned he could be angry, too—and hurt. But what had really happened?

Again, she said: "I don't know how to feel about him."

"What can I do to help?" It was all he could say, but the words felt inadequate.

She pushed away from him. "Antony Bondelli, the attorney—we've hired him. He wants to talk to you. I . . . I told him about your report on . . . father—the time he turned in the false fire alarm." Her face crumpled. "Oh, Andy—why did you go away? I needed you. We needed you."

"Ruth . . . your father wouldn't take any help from me."

"I know. He hated you . . . because of . . . what you said. But he still needed you."

"Nobody listened to me, Ruth. He was too important a man for . . ."

"Bondelli thinks you can help with the insanity plea. He asked me to see you, to . . ." She shrugged, pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, wiped her cheeks.

So that's it, Thurlow thought. She's making up to me to get my help, buying my help!

He turned away to hide his sudden anger and the pain. For a moment, his eyes didn't focus, then he grew aware (quite slowly, it seemed) of a subtle Brownian movement at the edge of the grove. It was like a swarm of gnats, but unlike them too. His glasses. Where were his glasses? In the car! The *gnats* dissolved away upward. Their retreat coincided with the lifting of an odd pressure from his senses, as though a sound or something like a sound had been wearing on his nerves, but now was gone.

"You will help?" Ruth asked. *Was that the same sort of thing I saw at Murphrey's window?* Thurlow asked himself. *What is it?*

Ruth took a step nearer, looked up at his profile. "Bondelli thought—because of us—you might . . . hesitate."

The damned pleading in her voice! His mind replayed her question. He said: "Yes, I'll help any way I can."

"That man . . . in the jail is just a shell," she said. Her voice was low, flat, almost without expression. He looked down at her, seeing how her features drew inward as she spoke. "He's not my father. He just looks like my father. My father's dead. He's been dead . . . for a long time."

We didn't realize it . . . that's all."

God! How pitiful she looked!

"I'll do everything I can," he said, "but . . ."

"I know there isn't much hope," she said. "I know how they feel—the people. It was my mother this man killed."

"People sense he's insane," Thurlow said, his voice unconsciously taking a pedantic tone. "They know it from the way he talks—from what he did. Insanity is, unfortunately, a communicable disease. He's aroused a counter-insanity. He's an irritant the community wants removed. He raises questions about themselves that people can't answer."

"We shouldn't be talking about him," she said. "Not here." She looked around the grove. "But I have to talk about him—or go crazy."

"That's quite natural," he said, his voice carefully soothing. "The disturbance *he* created, the community disturbance is . . . Damn it! Words are so stupid sometimes!"

"I know," she said. "I can take the clinical approach, too. If my . . . if that man in the jail should be judged insane and sent to a mental hospital, people'd have to ask themselves very disturbing questions."

"Can a person appear sane when he thinks he's sane? Could *I* be insane enough to do the things this man did?"

"I'm through crying now," she said. She glanced up at Thurlow, looked away. "The daughter's had her fill of . . . sorrow. I . . ." She took a deep breath. "I can . . . hate . . . for the way my mother died. But I'm still a psychiatric nurse, and I know all the professional cant. None of it helps the daughter much. It's odd—as though I were more than one person."

Again, she looked up at Thurlow, her expression open, without any defenses. "And I can run to the man I love and ask him to take me away from here because I'm afraid . . . deathly afraid."

The man I love! Her words seared his mind. He shook his head. "But . . . what about . . ."

"Nev?" How bitter she made the name sound. "I haven't lived with Nev for three months now. I've been staying with Sarah French. Nev . . . Nev was a hideous mistake. That *grasping* little man!"

Thurlow found his throat was tight with suppressed emotion. He coughed, looked up at the darkening sky, said: "It'll be dark in a few minutes." How stupidly inane the words sounded!

She put a hand on his arm. "Andy, oh Andy, what've I done to us?"

She came into his arms very gently. He stroked her hair. "We're still here," he said. "We're still us."

Ruth looked up at him. "The trouble with that man in the jail is he has a *sane* type of delusion." Tears were running down her cheeks, but her voice remained steady. "He thinks my mother was unfaithful to him. Lots of men worry about that. I imagine . . . even . . . Nev could worry about that."

A sudden gust of wind shook raindrops off the leaves, spattering them.

Ruth freed herself from his arms. "Let's walk out to the point."

"In the dark?"

"We know the way. Besides, the riding club has lights there now. You see them every night across the valley from the hospital. They're automatic."

"It's liable to rain."

"Then it won't matter if I cry. My cheeks'll already be wet."

"Ruth . . . honey . . . I . . ."

"Just take me for a walk the way . . . we used to."

Still he hesitated. There was something fearful about the grove . . . a pressure, an *almost* sound. He stepped to the car reached in and found his glasses. He slipped them on, looked around—nothing. No gnats, not a sign of anything odd—except the pressure.

"You won't need your glasses," Ruth said. She took his arm.

Thurlow found he couldn't speak past a sudden ache in his throat. He tried to analyze his

fear. It wasn't a personal thing. He decided he was afraid for Ruth.

"Come on," she said.

He allowed her to lead him across the grass toward the bridle path. Darkness came like a sharp demarcation as they emerged from the eucalyptus grove onto the first rise up through pines and buckeyes that hemmed the riding club's trail. Widely spaced night-riding lights attached to the trees came on with a wet glimmering through drenched leaves. In spite of the afternoon's rain, the duff-packed trail felt firm underfoot.

"We'll have the trail to ourselves tonight," Ruth said. "No one'll be out because of the rain." She squeezed his arm.

But we don't have it to ourselves, Thurlow thought. He could feel a presence with them—a hovering something . . . watchful, dangerous. He looked down at Ruth. The top of her head came just above his shoulder. The red hair glinted wetly in the dim overhead light. There was a feeling of damp silence around them—and that odd sense of pressure. The packed duff of the trail absorbed their footfalls with barely a sound.

This is a crazy feeling, he thought. *If a patient described this to me, I'd begin probing immediately for the source of the delusional material.*

"I used to walk up here when

I was a child," Ruth said. "That was before they put in the lights for the night parties. I hated it when they put in the lights."

"You walked here in the dark?" he asked.

"Yes. I never told you that, did I?"

"No."

"The air feels clear after the rain." She took a deep breath.

"Didn't your parents object? How old were you?"

"About eleven, I guess. My parents didn't know. They were always so busy with parties and things."

The bridle path diverged at a small glade with a dark path leading off to the left through an opening in a rock retaining wall. They went through the gap, down a short flight of steps and onto the tarred top of an elevated water storage tank. Below them the city's lights spread wet velvet jewels across the night. The lights cast an orange glow against low hanging clouds.

Now, Thurlow could feel the odd pressure intensely. He looked up and around—nothing. He glanced down at the pale greyness of Ruth's face.

"When we got here, you used to say: 'May I kiss you?'" she said. "And I used to say: 'I was hoping you'd ask.'"

Ruth turned, pressed against him, lifted her face. His fears, the vague pressure, all were forgotten as he bent to kiss her. It



seemed for a moment that time had moved backward, that Denver, Nev—none of these things had happened. But the warmth of her kiss, the demanding way her body pressed against him—these filled him with a mounting astonishment. He pulled away.

"Ruth, I . . ."

She put a finger against his lips. "Don't say it." Then: "Andy, didn't you ever want to go to a motel with me?"

"Hell! Lots of times, but . . ."

"You've never made a real pass at me."

He felt that she was laughing at him, and this brought anger into his voice. "I was in love with you!"

"I know," she whispered.

"I didn't want just a roll in the hay. I wanted . . . well, damnit, I wanted to *mate* with you, have children, the whole schmoo."

"What a fool I was," she whispered.

"Honey, what're you going to do? Are you going to get . . . a . . ." He hesitated.

"A divorce?" she asked. "Of course—afterward."

"After the . . . trial."

"Yes."

"That's the trouble with a small town," he said. "everyone knows everyone else's business even when it's none of their business."

"For a psychologist, that's a

very involved sentence," she said. She snuggled against him, and they stood there silently while Thurlow remembered the vague pressure and proved for it in his mind as though it were a sore tooth. Yes, it was still there. When he relaxed his guard, a deep disquiet filled him.

"I keep thinking about my mother," Ruth said.

"Ch?"

"She loved my father, too."

Coldness settled in his stomach. He started to speak, remained silent as his eyes detected movement against the orange glow of clouds directly in front of him. An object settled out of the clouds and came to a hovering stop about a hundred yards away and slightly above their water-tank vantage point. Thurlow could define the thing's shape against the background glow—four shimmering tubular legs beneath a fluorescing green dome. A rainbow circle of light whirled around the base of each leg.

"Andy! You're hurting me!"

He realized he had locked his arms around her in a spasm of shock. Slowly, he released his grip.

"Turn around," he whispered. "Tell me what you see out there against the clouds."

She gave him a puzzled frown, turned to peer out toward the city. "Where?"

"Slightly above us—straight ahead against the clouds."

"I don't see anything."

The object began drifting nearer. Thurlow could distinguish figures behind the green dome. They moved in a dim, phosphorescent light. The rainbow glow beneath the thing's tubular legs began to fade.

"What're you looking at?" Ruth asked. "What is it?"

He felt her trembling beneath his hand on her shoulder. "Right there," he said, pointing. "Look, right there."

She bent to stare along his arm. "I don't see a thing—just clouds."

He wrenched off his glasses. "Here. Look through these." Even without glasses, Thurlow could see the thing's outline. It coasted along the edge of the hill—nearer... nearer.

Ruth put on the glasses, looked where he pointed. "I... a dark blur of some kind," she said. "It looks like... smoke or a cloud... or... insects. Is it a swarm of insects?"

Thurlow's mouth felt dry. There was a painful constricting sensation in his throat. He reclaimed his glasses, looked at the drifting object. The figures inside were quite distinct now. He counted five of them, the great staring eyes all focused on him.

"Andy! What is it you see?"

"You're going to think I'm nuts."

"What is it?"

He took a deep breath, described the object.

"Five men in it?"

"Perhaps they're men, but they're very small. They look no more than three feet tall."

"Andy, you're frightening me. Why are you frightening me?"

"I'm frightening myself."

She pressed back into his arms. "Are you sure you see this... this... I can't see a thing."

"I see them as plainly as I see you. If it's illusion, it's a most complete illusion."

The rainbow glow beneath the tubular legs had become a dull blue. The object settled lower, lower, came to a hovering stop about fifteen yards away and level with them.

"Maybe it's a new kind of helicopter," Ruth said. "Or... Andy, I still can't see it."

"Describe what you see..." He pointed. "...right there."

"A little mistiness. It looks like it's going to rain again."

"They're working with a square machine of some kind," he said. "It has what look like short antennae. The antennae glow. They're pointing it at us."

"Andy, I'm scared." She was shivering in his arms.

"I... think we'd better get out of here," he said. He willed himself to leave, found he couldn't move.

"I... can't... move," Ruth whispered.

He could hear her teeth chat-

tering, but his own body felt frozen in dull cement.

"Andy, I can't move!" There was hysteria in her voice. "Is it still there?"

"They're pointing some device at us," he husked. His voice felt as though it came from far away, from another person. "They're doing this to us. Are you *sure* you can't see anything?"

"Nothing! A misty little cloud, nothing else."

Thurlow felt suddenly that she was just being obstinate. Anyone could see the thing right there in front of them! Intense anger at her surged through him. Why wouldn't she admit she saw it? Right there! He hated her for being so obstinate. The irrational abruptness of the emotion asserted itself in his awareness. He began to question his own reaction.

How could I feel hate for Ruth? I love her.

As though this thought freed him, Thurlow found he could move his legs, he began backing away, dragging Ruth with him. She was a heavy, unmoving weight. Her feet scraped against the gravel in the tank's surface.

His movement set off a flurry of activity among the creatures beneath the green dome. They buzzed and fussed over their square machine. A painful constriction seized Thurlow's chest. Each breath took a laboring concentration. Still, he continued

backing away, dragging Ruth with him. She sagged in his arms now. His foot encountered a step and he almost fell. Slowly, he began inching backward up the steps. Ruth was a dead weight.

"Andy," she gasped. "Can't . . . breath."

"Hold . . . on," he rasped.

They were at the top of the steps now, then back through the gap in the stone wall. Movement became somewhat easier, although he could still see the domed object hovering beyond the water storage tank. The glowing antennae remained pointed at him.

Ruth began to move her legs. She turned and they hobbled together onto the bridle path. Each step grew easier. Thurlow could hear her taking deep, sighing breaths. Abruptly, as though a weight had been lifted from them, they regained full use of their muscles.

They turned.

"It's gone," Thurlow said.

She reacted with an anger that astonished him. "What were you trying to pull back there, Andy Thurlow? Frightening me half out of my wits!"

"I saw what I told you I saw," he said. "You may not've seen it, but you certainly felt it." "Hysterical paralysis," she said.

"It gripped us both at the same instant and left us both at the same instant," he said.

"Why not?"

"Ruth, I saw exactly what I described."

"Flying saucers!" she sneered.

"No . . . well, maybe. But it was there!" He was angry, now, defensive. A rational part of him saw how insane the past few minutes had been. Could it have been illusion? No! He shook his head. "Honey, I saw . . ."

"Don't you *honey* me!"

He grabbed her shoulders, shook her. "Ruth! Two minutes ago you were saying you love me. Can you turn it off just like that?"

"I . . ."

"Does somebody want you to hate me?"

"What?" She stared up at him, her face dim in the tree lights.

"Back there . . ." He nodded toward the tank. "I felt myself angry with you . . . hating you. I told myself I couldn't hate you. I love you. That's when I found I could move. But when I felt the . . . hate, the instant I felt it, that was exactly when they pointed their machine at us."

"What machine?"

"Some kind of box with glowing rods or antennae sticking out of it."

"Are you trying to tell me that those nutty . . . whatever could make you feel hate . . . or . . ."

"That's how it felt."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard!" She backed away from him.

"I know it's crazy, but that's

how it felt." He reached for her arm. "Let's get back to the car."

Ruth pulled away. "I'm not going a step with you until you explain what happened out there."

"I can't explain it."

"How could you see it when I couldn't?"

"Maybe the accident . . . my eyes, the polarizing glasses."

"Are you sure that accident at the radlab didn't injure more than your eyes?"

He suppressed a surge of anger. It was so easy to feel angry. With some difficulty, he held his voice level. "They had me on the artificial kidney for a week and with every test known to God and man. The burst altered the ion exchange system in the cones of my retinas. That's all. And it isn't permanent. But I think whatever happened to my eyes, that's why I can see these things. I'm not supposed to see them, but I can."

Again, he reached for her, captured her arm. Half dragging her, he set off down the path. She fell into step beside him.

"But what could they be?" she asked.

"I don't know, but they're real. Trust me, Ruth. Trust me that much. They're real." He knew he was begging and hated himself for it, but Ruth moved closer, tucked her arm under his.

"All right, darling, I trust you."

You saw what you saw. What're you going to do about it?"

They came off the trail and into the eucalyptus grove. The car was a darker shape among shadows. Thurlow drew her to a stop beside it.

"How hard is it to believe me?" he asked.

She was silent for a moment, then: "It's . . . difficult."

"Okay," he said. "Kiss me."

"What?"

"Kiss me. Let's see if you really hate me."

"Andy, you're being . . ."

"Are you afraid to kiss me?"

"Of course not!"

"Okay then." He pulled her to him. Their lips met. For an instant, he sensed resistance; then she melted into his embrace, her arms creeping behind his neck.

Presently, he drew away.

"If that's hate, I want lots of it," he said.

"Me, too."

Again, she pressed herself against him.

Thurlow felt his blood pounding. He pulled away with an abrupt, defensive motion.

"Sometimes I wish you weren't so damned Victorian," she said. "But maybe I wouldn't love you then."

He brushed a strand of the red hair away from her cheek. How faintly glowing her face looked in the light from the bridle trail lamps behind him. "I think I'd

better take you home . . . to Sarah."

"I don't want you to take me home."

"I don't want you to go home."

"But I'd better?"

"You'd better."

She put her hands against his chest, pushed away.

They got into the car, moving with a sudden swift embarrassment. Thurlow started the engine, concentrated on backing to the turn-around. The headlights picked outlines of crusty brown bark on the trees. Abruptly, the headlights went dark. The engine died with a gasping cough. A breathless, oppressive sensation seized him.

"Andy!" Ruth said. "What's happening?"

Thurlow forced himself to turn to the left, wondering how he knew where to look. There were four rainbow glows close to the ground, the tubular legs and the green dome just outside the grove. The thing hovered there, silent, meancing.

"They're back," he whispered. "Right there." He pointed.

"Andy . . . Andy, I'm frightened." She huddled against him.

"No matter what happens, you don't hate me," he said. "You love me. Remember that. You love me. Keep it in your mind."

"I love you." Her voice was faint.

A directionless sense of anger began to fill Thurlow. It had no

object at first. Just anger. Then he could actually feel it trying to point at Ruth.

"I . . . want to . . . hate you," she whispered.

"You love me," he said. "Don't forget that."

"I love you. Oh, Andy, I love you. I don't want to hate you . . . I love you."

Thurlow lifted a fist, shook it at the green dome. "Hate them," he rasped. "Hate bastards who'd try to manipulate us that way."

He could feel her shaking and trembling against his shoulder. "I . . . hate . . . them," she said.

"Now, do you believe me?"

"Yes! Yes, I believe you!"

"Could the car have hysterical paralysis?"

"No. Oh, Andy, I couldn't just turn on hate against you. I couldn't." His arm ached where she clutched it. "What are they? My, God! What is it?"

"I don't think they're human," Thurlow said.

"What're we going to do?"

"Anything we can."

The rainbow circles beneath the dome shifted into the blue, then violet and into red. The thing began to lift away from the grove. It receded into the darkness. With it, went the sense of oppression.

"It's gone, isn't it?" Ruth whispered.

"It's gone."

"Your lights are on," she said. He looked down at the dash

lights, out at the twin cones of the headlights stabbing into the grove.

He recalled the shape of the thing then—like a giant spider ready to pounce on them. He shuddered. What were the creatures in that ominous machine?

Like a giant spider.

His mind dredged up a memory out of childhood: *Oberon's palace has walls of spider's legs.*

Were they faerie, the huldu-folk?

Where did the myths originate, he wondered. He could feel his mind questing down old paths, and he remembered a verse from those days of innocence—

"See ye not you bonny road
That winds about you fernie
brae?

That is the road to fair Elf-
land

Where thou and I this night
maun gae."

"Hadn't we better go?" Ruth asked.

He started the engine, his hands moving automatically through the kinesthetic pattern.

"It stopped the motor and turned off the lights," Ruth said. "Why would they do that?"

They! he thought. *No doubts now.*

He headed the car out of the grove down the hill toward Moreno Drive.

"What're we going to do?" Ruth asked.

"Can we do anything?"

"If we talk about it, people'll say we're crazy. Besides . . . the two of us . . . up here . . ."

We're neatly boxed, he thought. And he imagined what Whelye would say to a recountal of this night's experiences. "You were with another man's wife, you say? Could guilt feelings have brought on this shared delusion?" And if this met with protests and further suggestions—"Faerie folk? My dear Thurlow, do you feel well?"

Ruth leaned against him. "Andy, if they could make us hate, could they make us love?"

He swerved the car over to the shoulder of the road, turned off the motor, set the handbrake, extinguished the lights. "They're not here right now."

"How do we know?"

He stared around at the night—blackness, not even starlight under those clouds . . . no glow of weird object—but beyond the trees bordering the road . . . what?

Could they make us love?

Damn her for asking such a question!

No! I mustn't damn her. I must love her . . . I . . . must.

"Andy? What're you doing?"

"Thinking."

"Andy, even with us—I still find this whole thing so unreal. Couldn't there be some other explanation? I mean, your motor stopping . . . Motors do stop; lights go out. Don't they?"

"What do you want from me?" he asked. "Do you want me to say yes, I'm nuts, I'm deluded, I'm . . ."

She put a hand over his mouth. "What I want is for you to make love to me and never stop."

He started to put an arm around her, but she pushed him away. "No. When that happens, I want to know it's us making love, not someone forcing us."

Damn her practicality! he thought. Then: No! I love her . . . but is it me loving her? Is it my own doing?

"Andy? There is something you can do for me."

"What?"

"The house on Manchester Avenue . . . where Nev and I were living—there're some things I want from there, but I've been afraid to go over there alone. Would you take me?"

"Now?"

"It's early yet. Nev may still be down at the plant. My . . . father made him assistant manager, you know. Hasn't anyone told you that's why he married me? To get the business."

Thurlow put a hand on her arm. "You want him to know . . . about us?"

"What's there to know?"

He returned his hand to the steering wheel. "Okay, darling. As you say."

Again, he started the motor, pulled the car onto the road. They drove in silence. The tires hissed

against wet pavement. Other cars passed, their lights glaring. Thurlow adjusted the polarizing lenses. It was a delicate thing—to give him enough visibility but prevent the pain of sudden light.

Presently, Ruth said: "I don't want any trouble, a fight. You wait for me in the car. If I need help, I'll call."

"You're sure you don't want me to go in with you?"

"He won't try anything if he knows you're there."

He shrugged. She was probably right. Certainly, she must know Nev Hudson's character by now. But Thurlow still felt a nagging sensation of suspended judgment. He suspected the events of the past few days; even the menacing encounter of this night, made some odd kind of sense.

"Why did I marry him?" Ruth asked. "I keep asking myself. God knows. I don't. It just seemed to come to the point where . . ." She shrugged. "After tonight, I wonder if any of us knows why we do what we do." She looked up a Thurlow. "Why is this happening, darling?"

That's it, Thurlow thought. There's the sixty-four dollar question. It's not Who are these creatures? It's . . . What do they want? Why are they interfering with our lives?

Fraffin glared at the image projected above his desk. It was Lutt, his Master-of-Craft, a broad-faced Chem, steely skinned, harsh and

abrupt in his decisions, lacking subtlety. He combined all the best qualities for one who supervised the mechanical end of this work, but those very qualities interfered with his present assignment. He obviously equated subtlety with caution.

A moment of silence served to acquaint Lutt with the Director's displeasure. Fraffin felt the contour pressures of his chair, glanced at the silvery web of the pantovive across the salon. Yes, Lutt was like that instrument. He had to be *activated* correctly.

Fraffin ran a finger along his jaw, said: "I didn't tell you to spare the immune. You were directed to bring the female here—at once!"

"If I have erred, I abase myself," Lutt said. "But I acted on the basis of past directives concerning this immune. The way you gave his female to another, the way you . . ."

"He was an amusing diversion, no more," Fraffin said. "Kelexel has asked to *examine* a native, and he has mentioned this female specifically by name. She is to be brought here at once, unharmed. That proviso doesn't apply to *any* other native who tries to interfere or delay you in the execution of this order. Am I understood?"

"The Director is understood," Lutt said. There was fear in his voice. Lutt knew the possible consequences of Fraffin's dis-

pleasure: dismissal from a position of unlimited delights and diversions, from a life that never bored. He lived in a Chem paradise from which he could easily be shunted to some tertiary post and with no recourse because they shared the same guilt, he and Fraffin, the same guilt with its certain terrible punishment if they were ever discovered.

"Without delay," Faffin said.

"She will be here before this shift is half spent," Lutt said. "I go to obey."

Lutt's image faded, disappeared.

Fraffin leaned back. It was going fairly well . . . in spite of this delay. Imagine that Lutt trying to separate the lovers by manipulating their emotions! The clod must know the danger of trying that on an immune. Well, the female would be here soon, and Kelexel could examine her as he wished. Every tool and device to bend the native's will would be provided, of course—as a matter of courtesy. Let no one question the hospitality of Faffin the Director.

Fraffin chuckled.

Accomplished breeding would accelerate the Investigator's need for rejuvenation and then where could he turn? Could he go back to the Primacy and say: 'Rejuvenate me; I've produced an unlicensed child.'? His flesh wouldn't permit that—no more

than would the Primacy with its hidebound absolutes.

Oh, no. Kelexel would know the storyship had its own Rejuvenators, its own surgeon. He'd come begging, his mind telling him: '*I can have as many children as I wish and damn the Primacy!*' Once he'd been rejuvenated, the storyship would own him.

.Again, Faffin chuckled.

They might even get back to the lovely little war in time to make a complete production out of it.

Ruth was surprised to find herself enjoying the anger that condensed the room around her. The frustrated emotion that had built up in her out there in the night with Andy had an outlet at last. She watched the nervous twisting of Nev's pink hands with their baby-skin creases at the knuckles. She knew how his hands betrayed his feelings no matter what the masked rest of him revealed. Eight months of living with the man had given her considerable knowledge. Words came out of her full lips now like slivers of bamboo to be inserted beneath Nev's manicured soul.

"Scream about your husband's rights all you want," she said. "The business is mine now, and I don't want you anywhere near it. Ohhh, I know why you married me. You didn't fool me for long, Nev. Not for long."

"Ruth, you . . ."

"No more! Andy's out there waiting for me. I'm going to take the few things I want here, and I'm leaving."

Nev's wide high forehead creased. The shoe-button eyes stared at her with their matched nothingness. *On one of her rambages again, that's all. And enjoying it, damn her! I can tell by the way she shakes her head . . .*

Ruth broke her gaze away from him. Nev frightened her when he stared that way. She studied the room, wondering if there were anything here she wanted now. Nothing. It was a Nev Hudson room with overlapping muted reds and browns, Oriental bric-a-brac, a grand piano in one corner, a closed violin case that opened to reveal three bottles of liquor and a set of glasses. Nev liked that. '*Let's get drunk and make beautiful music, honey.*' Windows beyond the piano stood uncurtained to the night and garden lights, lawn, barbecue pit, wrought iron furniture standing whitely dripping after the rain.

"California is a community-property state," Nev said.

"You'd better look into the law again," she said. "The business is my inheritance."

"Inheritance?" he asked. "But your father's not dead yet."

She stood staring at the night, refusing to let him goad her.

Damn her! he thought. *I*

should've done better in a woman but not with a business thrown into the bargain. She's thinking about that bastard Andy Thurlow. She wants him but she needs my brains running the business. That ugly stick of a boy-man! She won't have him; I'll see to it.

"If you go away with this Dr. Thurlow, I'll ruin him professionally and I'll ruin you," he said.

She turned her head sideways, presenting a Greek profile, the severe line of her red hair tied at the back. A barely perceptible smile touched her lips, was gone. "*Jealous, Nev?*"

"You married me for the business," she said. "What do you care how I spend my time?" And she turned toward him. Squirm you little pig of a man! What was I thinking of? What was I ever thinking of to take you instead of Andy? Did something twist my emotions, make me do it? She felt suddenly weak with the hungry hating. Is any choice ever right right right? Andy choosing that Fellowship instead of me, his eyes full of innocence oh hateful! Where did I spend my innocence? Unthinking about animal bodies and power. Did I choose power in Nev? But he let me take it away from him his own power and now I can hate him with it.

"The daughter of a murderer!" he snapped.

She glared at him. Is this what

I chose? Why why why? Lonely, that's why. All alone when Andy left me for that damned Fellowship and there was Nev Nev Nev insistent kind kind like a fox. Drunk I was drunk and feeling hateful. Nev used my hate that's the only power he had—hate my hate my hate I mustn't hate then he's powerless but oh so kind he was so kind and there we were married and Andy away in Denver and I was still alone.

"I'm going," she said. "Andy's going to drive me over to Sarah's. If you try to stop me, I'll call him in, and I'm quite sure he can handle you."

Nev's narrow, purse-string mouth tightened. His shoe-button eyes betrayed a brief flaring, and then the mask was back in place. *I'll ruin them both! The bitch prattling about Andy well I showed dear old honest Andy the boy with the built in system of honor and what would she say if she learned I was the one put on the pressure to get him that Fellowship?*

"You know what the town'll think," he said. "Like father, like daughter. They'll take my side. You know that."

She stamped her foot. "You pig!"

Certainly, Ruth, my dear. Get angry and stamp around like a wonderful animal my god you're splendid when you're angry. I'm better for you than Andy and

you should know it we're two of a kind we take what we want and damn the honor or no honor no honor on her on her on her what an animal when she's angry but that's what lifes for to take to take and take and take until we're filled up on it and she raves about Andy going back to him but Andy doesn't take from me no siree I'll get rid of him just as easily as I did before and Ruthie'll come crawling back to her ever loving Nev . . .

"We'll strike a bargain," he said. "Go along with your lover, but don't interfere with how I run the business. You said it yourself: What do I care how you spend your time?"

Go ahead, compromise yourselves, he thought. I'll own you.

She whirled away, strode down the hall, jerked open the bedroom door, snapped on the light.

Nev was right behind her. He stood in the doorway watching as she yanked clothes from drawers and the closet, threw them on the bed.

"Well, what about it?" he asked.

She forced words out of her mouth, knowing they told more than she wanted to reveal. "All right! Keep the business . . . or whatever. We know what's precious to you." She turned to face him, near tears and fighting to hide it. "You're the most hateful creature I've ever met! You can't

be human." She put a hand to her mouth. "I wonder if you are."

"What's that supposed to . . ." He broke off, stared past her toward the French doors onto the patio. "Ruth . . ." Her name came out in a strangled gasp.

She whirled.

The French doors stood open to reveal three squat figures clothed in green moving into the room. To Ruth, their heads seemed strangely large, the eyes faintly luminous and frightening. They carried short tubes of silvery metal. There was a disdainful sense of power in the purposeful way they fanned out, pointing those metal tubes casually at the bedroom's occupants.

Ruth found herself wondering with an odd feeling of surprise how they'd opened the French doors without her hearing it.

Behind her, Nev gasped, said: "See here! Who . . ." His voice trailed off in a frightening hiss, an exhalation as though he were a punctured balloon. A liquid trilling sound poured from the mouth of the creature on Ruth's right.

This can't be happening, she thought. Then: They're the creatures who frightened us in the grove! What do they want? What're they doing?

She found suddenly that she couldn't move. Her head felt detached, mind clear, but there were no connections to her body.

One of the creatures moved to stand directly in front of her—a queer little manling in green leotards, his torso partly concealed in a cloudy, bulging roundness that pulsed with a purple inner light. She remembered Andy's description of what he'd seen: "*Glowing eyes . . .*"

Andy! She wanted to scream for him, but her voice wouldn't obey. How drifting and soft the world seemed!

Something jerked past her, and she saw Nev there walking as though pulled by strings. Her eyes focused on a smudge of powder along his shoulder, a pulsing vein at his temple. He tipped forward suddenly in that strange marionette way, falling rigidly into one of the open French doors. There came the crash and tinkling of broken glass. The floor around him became bright with flowing red. He twitched, lay still.

The gnome creature in front of her spoke quite distinctly in English: "An accident, you see?"

She had no voice to answer, only a distant horror somewhere within the powdery billowing that was herself. Ruth closed her eyes, thinking: *Andy! Oh, Andy, help me!*

Again, she heard one of the creatures speak in that liquid trilling. She tried to open her eyes, couldn't. Waves of darkness began to wash over what remained of her awareness. As

unconsciousness came, her mind focused clearly on a single oddly pertinent thought: *This can't be happening because no one would believe it. This is a nightmare, that's all.*

Thurlow sat in the dark car smoking his pipe, wondering what was taking Ruth so long in the house. *Should I go in after all?* he asked himself. *It isn't right that I stay out here while she's in there alone with him. But she said she could handle him.*

Did Adele think she could handle Joe?

That's a crazy thought!

It was raining again, a thin drizzle that misted the streetlight at the corner in front of him. He turned, glanced at the house—lights in the living room, but no sign of movement behind the drawn shades.

When she comes to the door I'll go up and help her carry whatever . . . no! Dammit, I should go in now. But she must know if she can handle him.

Handle him!

What was it like, those two? Why did she marry him?

He shook his head, looked away from the house. The night appeared too dark beyond the street-lights, and he eased off the setting on his polarizing lenses.

What was keeping her in there?

He thought suddenly of the

hovering object he'd seen at the grove. *There must be some logical explanation,* he thought. *Perhaps if I called the Air Force . . . anonymously . . . Somebody must have a simple, logical explanation.*

But what if they haven't?

My God! What if the saucer nuts turn out to've been right all along?

He tried to see his wristwatch, remembered it hadn't been wound. Damn, she was taking a long time in there!

Like a train shunted onto an odd track, his mind veered to a memory of Ruth's father, the compelling directness of the man's eyes. *"Take care of Ruthey!"*

And that thing hovering at Joe's window—what had that been?

Thurlow took off his glasses, polished them with a handkerchief, slipped them back on his nose. He remembered Joe Murphrey in April, right after the man had turned in the false fire alarm. What a shock it had been to find Ruth's father facing him in the dirty little examination room above the sheriff's office. And there'd been the even greater shock at evaluating the man's tests. The dry language of his report to the probation office couldn't begin to convey the shock.

"I found him to be a man lacking a good central core of bal-

anced feelings. This, coupled to a dangerous compulsive element such as the false fire alarm, should be considered a warning of serious disturbance. Here is a man whose psychological makeup contains all the elements necessary for a terrible tragedy."

The language of the report—so careful in its wording, maintaining the strict esoterica of official-ese . . . he'd known how little it might convey and had supplemented it with a verbal report.

"The man's dangerous. He's a definite paranoid type and could explode. He's capable of violence."

The disbelief had been frightening. "Surely this is nothing more than a prank. Joe Murphey! Hell, he's an important man here, Andy. Well . . . could you recommend analysis . . . psychoanalysis."

"He won't have anything to do with it . . . and I doubt it'd do him any good."

"Well, what do you expect us to do? Can't you recommend something?"

"Maybe we can get him into a church. I'll call Father Giles at the Episcopal church and see if . . ."

Thurlow remembered his rueful shrug, the too pat words: "I'll probably be read out of the order for this, but religion often does what psychology can't."

Thurlow sighed. Father Giles,

of course, had been unsuccessful.

Damn! What was keeping Ruth in that house? He reached for the car door, thought better of it. Give her a few more minutes. Everything was quiet in there. Probably it was taking her time to pack.

Ruth . . . Ruth . . . Ruth . . .

He remembered that she'd taken his probation report with better balance than the officials. But she was trained in his field, and she'd suspected for some time that her father was disturbed. Thurlow remembered he'd gone out to the hospital immediately after the session in the probation office. Ruth had accompanied him, looking withdrawn and fearful, into the almost deserted cafeteria. They'd taken their cups to a corner table. He remembered the steam-table smell of the place, the faint antiseptic background, the marbelized linoleum tabletop with its leftover coffee stains.

He cup had clattered in a trembling staccato as she'd put it down. He'd sat silently for a moment, sensing her need to come to grips with what he'd told her.

Presently, she'd nodded. Then: "I knew it . . . I guess."

"Ruth, I'll do everything I . . ."

"No." She tucked a strand of red hair under her cap. "They let him call me from the jail . . . just before you came. He was

furious with you. We won't accept anything you say."

They must've told him about my report, Thurlow thought. "Now he knows his mask of sanity isn't working," he said. "Of course he's furious."

"Andy . . . are you sure?"

She put her hand on his, her palm damp with perspiration. He held her hand, thinking of mingled perspiration: the idea carried an odd sense of intimacy.

"You're sure," she sighed. "I've seen it coming." Again, that deep sigh. "I didn't tell you about Christmas."

"Christmas?"

"Christmas Eve. My . . . I came home from the hospital. I had the late shift then, remember? He was walking around talking to himself . . . saying horrible things about mother. I could hear her upstairs in her room . . . crying. I . . . I guess I screamed at him, called him a liar."

She took two quick breaths.

"He . . . hit me, knocked me into the Christmas tree . . . everything knocked over . . ." She put a hand to her eyes. "He'd never hit me before—always said he didn't believe in spankings, he'd had so many beatings when he was a boy."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"We were . . . I . . . I was ashamed of . . . I thought if . . ." She shrugged. "I went out to the clinic and saw Dr. Whelye, but he said . . . fights, people in the

conflict of marriage are . . ."

"Sounds like him. Did your mother know he hit you?"

"She heard him storm out and slam the door. He didn't come back all night. Christmas Eve! She . . . she'd heard the commotion. She came down, helped me clean up the mess."

"I wish I'd known this when I was talking to . . ."

"What good would it do? Everyone defends him, even mother. You know what she said while she was helping me clean up? 'Your father's a very sick man, Ruthey.' Defending him!"

"But as long as she knows, maybe . . ."

"She doesn't mean mental illness. Dr. French thinks he has a progressive sclerotic condition, but he won't go into the hospital for a complete examination. She knows about this and that's what she meant. That's all she meant!"

"Ruth . . ." He thought about this revelation for a moment. "Ruth, severe conditions of this kind, Monckeberg's sclerosis, for example, frequently are accompanied by personality distortions. Didn't you know this?"

"I . . . he wouldn't cooperate, go to a hospital or anything. I talked to Dr. French . . . Whelye. He was no help at all. I warned mother—the violence and . . ."

"Perhaps if she'd . . ."

"They've been married twenty-seven years. I can't convince her he really might harm her."

"But he struck you, knocked you down."

"She said I provoked him."

Memories, memories—an anti-septic little corner of the hospital cafeteria and it was fixed in his memory now as indelibly as was this dark street outside the house where Ruth had lived with Nev. The warnings about Joe Murphey had been plain enough, but the world wasn't yet prepared to understand and protect itself from its own madness.

Again, he looked at the silent house, the glow of lights through the rain. As he looked, a woman in a glistening raincoat came running out between Ruth's house and the one on the left. For an instant, he thought it was Ruth, and he was half out of the car before the streetlight hit her and he saw it was an older woman with a coat thrown on over a robe. She wore slippers that squished wetly as she crossed the lawn.

"You, there!" she called, waving at Thurlow.

Thurlow came fully out of the car. The rain was cold in his hair, on his face. He felt so overcome with foreboding.

The woman came panting up to him, stopped with the rain running down out of her grey hair. "Our telephone's out," she said. "My husband's run across to the Innesses to use theirs, but I thought maybe all the phones're out, so I came..."

"Why do you need a phone?"
The words sounded hoarse even to him.

"We live next door . . ." She pointed. "I can see from our kitchen across the patio to the Hudsons', and I saw him laying there, so I ran over . . . he's dead . . ."

"Ruth . . . Mrs. Hudson?"

"No, Mr. Hudson. I saw her come in awhile ago, but there's no sign of her around. We've got to call the police."

"Yes, yes, of course." He started toward the house.

"She's not in there, I tell you. I ran all through the house."

"Maybe . . . maybe you missed . . ."

"Mister, there's been a terrible accident; maybe she's already gone for help."

"Accident?" He turned, stared back at her.

"He fell into one of them glass doors, cut an artery, looks like. She probably ran for help."

"But . . . I was out here and . . ."

A police cruiser came around the corner to his left, its red light flashing. It pulled to a stop behind his car. Two officers got out. Thurlow recognized one of them—Maybeck, Carl Maybeck, a slim angular man with bony wrists, narrow face. He came loping across the lawn to Thurlow while his companion went to the woman.

"Oh . . . Dr. Thurlow," May-

beck said. "Didn't recognize you." He stopped, facing Thurlow. "What's the trouble? We got a call, something about an accident. Ambulance's on the way.

"The woman there . . ." Thurlow nodded toward her. ". . . says Nev Hudson's dead, something about falling into some glass. She may be mistaken. Shouldn't we get inside and . . ."

"Right away, Doc."

Maybeck led the way running up to the front door. It was locked.

"Around the side," the woman called from behind them. "Patio doors're open."

They ran back down the steps, around the side, wet leaves of shrubbery soaking them. Thurlow felt himself moving in a daze. *Ruth! My God, where are you?* He skidded on the wet bricks of the patio, almost fell, righted himself and was staring down at the red mess that had been Nev Hudson.

Maybeck straightened from a brief examination of the man. "Dead all right." He looked at Thurlow. "How long you been here, Doc?"

"He brought Mrs. Hudson about half an hour ago." It was the neighbor woman. She came to a stop beside Thurlow. "He's dead enough, isn't he?" How delighted she sounded!

"I . . . I've been waiting in the car," Thurlow said.

"That's right," the woman said.

"We saw them come up. Expected another fight between Hudson there and his Missus. I heard the crash, him falling, but I was in the bathroom then. I came right out to the kitchen."

"Did you see Mrs. Hudson?" Maybeck asked.

"She wasn't anywhere around. There was a lot of smoke coming out of these doors here, though. He may've burnt something. He drank a lot, Mr. Hudson. May've been trying to open the doors for the smoke and . . ." She pointed to the body.

Thurlow wet his lips with his tongue. He was afraid to go in that house, he realized. He said: "Hadn't we better look inside. Perhaps . . ."

Maybeck met his stare. "Yes. Perhaps we had better."

They could hear an ambulance siren now. It wailed to silence out front. The other officer came around the house, said: "Ambulance is here, Carl. Where . . ." He saw the body.

"Tell 'em not to disturb any more than they have to," Maybeck said. "We're going to look around inside."

The other officer peered suspiciously at Thurlow.

"This is Dr. Thurlow," Maybeck said.

"Oh," The officer turned to direct men in white coming around the house.

Maybeck led the way inside. Thurlow was caught immed-

iately by the sight of Ruth's clothing thrown on the bed. His chest felt tight, painful. The neighbor woman had said Ruth wasn't here, but . . .

Maybeck stooped, peered under the bed. He straightened, sniffed. "You smell something, Doc?"

Thurlow grew aware that there was an odd odor in the room—almost like burnt insulation.

"Almost smells like fire and brimstone," Maybeck said. "Probably *was* something burned in here." He glanced around. There was an empty ashtray on a night stand. It looked clean. He looked in the closet, went into an adjoining bath, returned shaking his head.

Thurlow went out to the hall, looked down it toward the living room. Maybeck brushed past him, led the way into the room. He moved cautiously but with a practised sureness, peered into the hall closet, behind a davenport. He touched only what he had to touch for his investigation.

They progressed through the house this way, Thurlow a hesitant onlooker, fearful of what they might find around the next corner.

Shortly, they were back in the bedroom.

The ambulance doctor stood in the door, smoking. He glanced at Maybeck. "Not much we can do here, Carl. Coroner's on his way."

"What's it look like?" May-



beck asked. "Was he pushed?"

"Looks like he stumbled," the doctor said. "Capret's pushed up there by his feet. Can't say much about his condition at the time, but there's a smell of whiskey on him."

Maybeck nodded, taking in the evidence. They could hear the other officer talking outside to the neighbor woman. "I don't know what it was," she said, her voice rising. "It just looked like a big cloud of smoke . . . steam, maybe. Or it could've been an insect bomb—something white and smokey."

Thurlow turned his back on the door. He found he couldn't stand the sight of the sprawled body. Ruth wasn't in the house; no doubt of that.

Insect bomb, he thought. White and smoky.

He recalled the grove then, the hovering *something* which Ruth had seen as a cloud. Abruptly, he knew what had happened to her. She wouldn't have disappeared like this without some word to him. *Something* had intruded here and taken her away. It would explain the strange smell, the presence of the thing at the grove, the interest of those weird creatures with their glowing eyes.

But why? he asked himself. *What do they want?*

Then: *This is crazy! She was here when Nev injured himself and she ran for help. She's at a*

neighbor's and she'll be back any moment.

And his mind said: *She's been gone a long time.*

She saw a crowd and now she's frightened, he told himself.

There was a bustle of activity at the door behind him—the Coroner and the police homicide squad. Maybeck came up beside Thurlow, said: "Doc, they want you to come down to the station and make a statement."

"Yes," he said. "Of course." Then: "That's the homicide detail. Surely they don't think . . ."

"Just routine, Doc," Maybeck said. "You know that. It looks like he was drinking and stumbled, but Mrs. Hudson's not around. We have to make sure . . . you know."

"I see." He allowed himself to be led out the door past the still figure that had been Ruth's husband, past the men with tape measures and cameras and dusting brushes and coldly measuring eyes.

Ruth's husband . . . Ruth's husband . . . The label boiled in his mind. *Where is she? Did she break down and run away? But she isn't the type for that. She was under strain, yes, but . . . What was that cloud the neighbor saw? What was that smell in the room?*

They were outside then. The rain had stopped, but the shrubbery beside the house still drenched them. Porch lights were

on across the street. People stood there staring. A white lab truck had pulled into the driveway beside the house on the other side.

"You know, Doc," Maybeck said. "You really shouldn't drive at night with those dark glasses."

"They're . . . adjustable," Thurlow said. "Not as dark as they look."

Ruth! Where are you?

He wondered then: *Did she push Nev . . . a fight? Did she think people would say, 'Like father, like daughter'? Did she run, not wanting to drag me into it?*

"You can ride with us," Maybeck said. "We'll bring you back to your car later."

"Yes." He allowed himself to

be eased into the back seat. Then: "Ruth . . . Mrs. Hudson—shouldn't someone be looking for . . . ?"

"We're looking for her, Doc," Maybeck said. "We'll find her, never you worry."

Will you find her? Thurlow wondered. What was that thing at the grove—looking at us, trying to manipulate our emotions? It was real. I know it was real. If it wasn't real, then I'm insane. And I know I'm not insane.

He looked down at his feet in the dim shadows behind the seat. They were soaking from the walk across the wet lawn.

Joe Murphrey, he thought. Joe knows he isn't insane.

To Be Concluded

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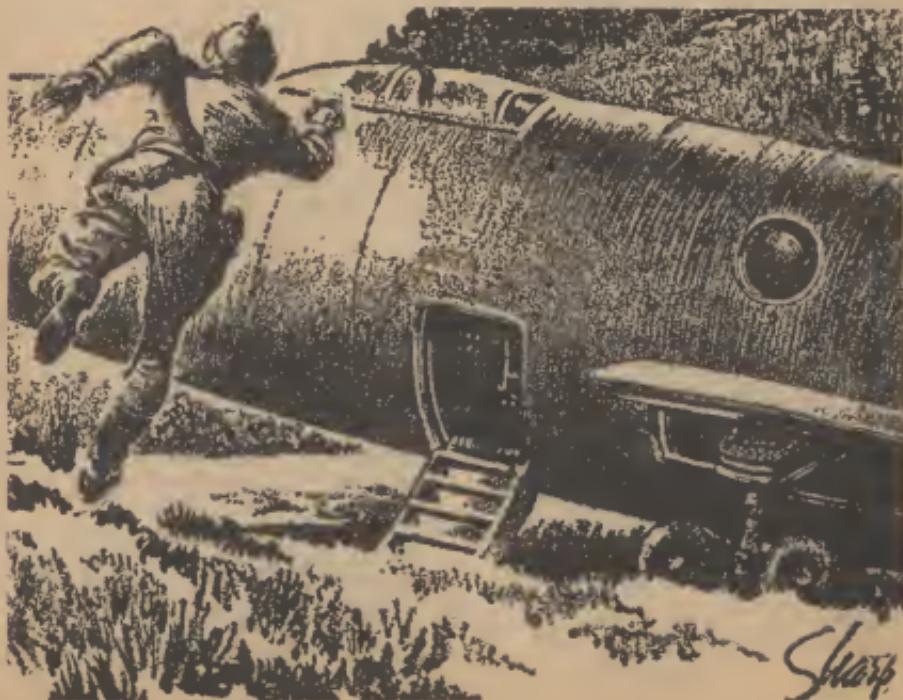


THE LAST BOUNCE

WILLIAM TENN

Illustrated by SHARPE

Back in the late forties when we first read "Child's Play"—a clever short about a Bild-A-Man set for future kids that somehow gets delivered as a Christmas present in ourtime—we gleefully assured ourselves that science fiction was now richer by at least one new master—William Tenn. And so it was, for after that Tenn went on to write many superb yarns, among them "Betelgeuse Bridge," "Firewater," and the following grim account of what happened to three Earth Scouts sent out to explore an Earth-type planet near the mysterious "Hole" in Cygnus—a sector of the galaxy that apparently never heard of Newton!



SHARPE

THERE wasn't much difference between Commissioner Breen's office and the office of any other memorandum baron in Sandstorm, the interstellar headquarters of the Patrol on Mars. If you've seen one, Vic Carlton decided, you'd seen them all; and, in twelve years of standing at attention during the wet-with-tradition ceremony known as the Kiss of Death, he had seen them all—every last uncompromising whitewashed cubicle. Rooms as friendly as a surgical table.

A few star maps speckling the glare from the walls; a bookcase filled with miscellaneous handbooks and manuals of space; one stiff, thin chair behind the stiff, square desk; and, over the desk, the Scout Roll of Honor—names of 563 men who had laid down their lives in the Service. 563 casualties out of a total all-time roster of 1,420.

Yet the Scouts were a volunteer service, and, every year, all over the galaxy, young men broke their backs and burst their brains to get into it.

The speech was pretty much the same as usual. Perhaps even better in one way: Breen was new to the job and slightly—well, embarrassed by this aspect of it. He kept his talk short, made the Kiss of Death almost a peck.

He was tall and straight as they: he had no more than three years on Vic Carlton, the oldest of

the three; and his blue uniform differed from theirs only in the badge of office, a gold star instead of a silver rocket on his chest.

"Lutz and O'Leary, you are under the command of Victor Carlton—one of the very few men on active duty with over ten years experience. Carlton, your two juniors have been certified as psychologically, physically and educationally fit for this mission: no more can be said of any man. I must remind you that the Patrol has been called the glory of space and the Scouts the glory of the Patrol; but I need not remind you how jealously that glory should be guarded. Good scouting, good luck. That is all."

He exhaled a tiny gust of relief before shutting his mouth.

All? Vic Carlton thought, as they saluted and about-faced to the door. This is only the beginning. You know that, Breen. The danger and the horror—death perhaps, agony without death perhaps — start officially when the commissioner's talk is finished. You should know: you decided you had a bellyfull six months ago and resigned from active duty for this sleek office job. When we walk out of your office, it's only the beginning.

Then he thought: *Hey, that's dangerous brainspit for a commander. Maybe Kay's right; maybe I'm getting old.*

And then he thought: Breen's only thirty-five; I'm thirty-two. I remember when I thought all commissioners were shambling wrecks held together by will-power and a handful of regulations. Why, Breen's only thirty-five! I am getting old!

They were out in the corridor, and a group of scouts being briefed for another set of missions swung down to the elevator with them. They clapped their helmets on, leaving the broad, flaring visors open.

"*Attaboy, O'Leary, take it on the bounce!"*

"You don't know how lucky you are, Lutz. Unkillable Carlton is my idea of a commander for a rookie's first mission."

"Look at Carlton, fellows. He's bored! What a man!"

"The first bounce is the hardest, O'Leary. Gee, I remember mine!"

"Hey, Lutz, what're you looking so green about? According to statistics, you have an even chance of coming back in one hunk!"

"On the bounce, O'Leary. On the bounce."

Carlton watched his men. O'Leary was the one to look out for at this point. Lutz was still riding the enthusiasm of graduation from the academy; he might be frightened at his baptismal mission, but he was even more exhilarated. He wouldn't be im-

portant until action started; and, even then, he'd probably have to be checked from daredevil stunts more than he would have to be encouraged to take a chance. But O'Leary was the one to watch.

It was tough making your first bounce. Vic remembered his—was it nine? No, eleven years ago. A commander who'd been so badly off that he'd requested disenrollment in preference to making a bounce, the other junior so psychologically smashed that he'd become a permanent resident of the tiny Patrol Mental Hospital on Ganymede. A kind of carnivorous moss had almost got them: pretty screaming awful. But Vic had been patched up and made his bounce on the very next mission out of Sandstorm. You had to bounce right back or your nerve would go.

Sure enough, O'Leary sounded off.

"We drew a creampuff. The planet's only three-tenths of a point off Earth-type."

The others hooted at that. "And it's out around the Hole in Cygnus! Where they found a nova acting like a third-magnitude star and a meteor stream traveling at the speed of light! The part of the galaxy that never heard of Newton! You can have it!"

"That region hasn't even been adequately mapped, O'Leary. It may be the place where time warped in on itself and exploded, where the universe got started.

A creampuff, he calls it! You can have it: I'll be happy with a planet six full points off Earth-type, in a sane area like Virgo or Taurus or something."

"Sure, don't kid yourself, O'Leary. But on the bounce, boy, take it on the bounce!"

"Hey, Lutz, what're you looking so green about?"

Harry Lutz giggled weakly and wiped palm sweat off on his blue jumper. Carlton slapped him on the back, kneaded his shoulder blades. "Don't worry, you have two experienced men behind you. We'll take care of you, won't we, O'Leary?"

O'Leary looked up startled, then nodded seriously. "Sure; we'll show you the ropes, kid."

Good. Get O'Leary's mind off himself, get him to worrying about the rookie instead, and he'd have no time for a funk.

The elevator stopped on the main floor of the Scout Operations Building unimaginatively decorated in azure plastic. Through the open double doors, Vic Carlton could see the mob of civilian personnel who always left their jobs when a mission took off. Death-watch in Sandstorm, the Scouts called it. Oh, well, he shrugged, it must be exciting for civilians. Man's empire extends another couple of light-years into space—that was probably exciting to some people.

Someone started the song—

*"Bell-bottom helmet, suit of SP blue,
He'll shoot the ether like his daddy used to do. . . ."*

The three had linked arms when they began singing. Their feet beating the rhythm, they marched down to the slender little ship with the long blue stripe that lay waiting for them at the end of Sagittarius Runway. Behind them, their honor guard of Scouts bawled the chorus at the pink Martian sky. On either side, people cheered. Evidently, Vic reflected, this was something to cheer about.

"What about you," Kay had asked last night, after he had hummed the song, lying with his head on her lap and watching the two moons of Mars coruscating overhead. They'd walked in the Rosenbloom Desert for two hours, and when she'd sat down in the coarse red sand, he'd put his head on her lap and hummed the song because he felt so strangely tranquil. "What about you—don't you want a son? Don't you want him to—to shoot the ether like his daddy used to do?"

"Kay, please. Of course I want a son. As soon as we can get married—"

"But you can't. Not while you're on active duty with the Scouts. You can't have a son. The only children that active Scouts

have are orphans. That's different, Vic. Orphans who never have seen their daddies."

He grimaced at her brown eyes, certain and serene under the perfect piles of blonde coiffure. "Look, I want to marry you, girl. I'm going to marry you. And I agree with you that we can't build a home-life around Scout missions."

"Yes, Vic."

"You're right about my being no good to you—or any woman—until I decide on my own that one planet is good enough for me. You don't want me counting jet-trails wistfully; and you don't want me with all the fire gone out—you said so yourself. I've got to want to build a family as much as I want to scout."

"Yes, Vic."

He made an impatient gesture and cut it short as he watched her draw five parallel trails in the sand with her fingers. "So? So it's just a matter of patience on your part, just a matter of waiting until I'm ready to chuck the whole thing. After all, I've been a Scout for twelve years; the odds against that length of service are pretty high—most men who survive five years of it are ready to quit. You'll have me soon, Kay—and not as a shoulder-shrugging has-been, but a guy who's adventured enough in space and is ready to roost. I'm still young by ordinary stand-

ards—only thirty-two. Trip after next, three or four missions from now maybe, I'll be ready. Soon."

A pause. Then—"Yes, Vic." Her voice was low, agreeable.

Somehow, in retrospect, it seemed like the most final of quarrels.

Vic found himself looking for Kay past O'Leary's huge head. She worked in Administration; she'd be in the bunch near the great white dome. He wished he could kiss her before they took off; but tradition demanded that farewells be said the night before and nothing interrupt the march to the ship.

He caught sight of her just as they reached the part of the song that always made her wince. Vic grinned in anticipation.

*"If it's a girl, dress her up
in lace;*

*If it's a boy, send the——
off to space!"*

She winced so hard, screwing her eyes down and pulling her shoulders up, that they had marched past her and into the ship before she looked around again.

The two regular Patrolmen who were on duty saluted and said, "Ship in good order, Commander, Luck." They left.

The other Scouts gave them one more round of handshakes before climbing silently through the open locks.

Vic pressed the green hex-

agonal button that shut the airlocks, and, leaping to the port-holes, they all took a last quick glimpse of Sandstorm's concrete buildings rising like so many bandaged thumps out of the rosy Martian plain.

"Jets in good order, Commander," the voice of the ground-crew chief announced. "Awaiting take-off."

"Mission crew ready," Vic told him in the communaphone, as Lutz and O'Leary went to their stations. "Taking off."

His eyes swept around the pilot-room, focused on his juniors for a double-check, came to rest on the clicking gauges.

"Jets away," he said and cut the communaphone connection.

He counted to fifteen slowly, thinking of the immemorial cry of "Jets away! Jets away away, jets away!" that was being sung out on the ground below as the crowd scattered.

"Fifteen," he said, and O'Leary pulled the red switch the requisite two notches, while Lutz swung the tiny wheels of the balance-control. They jerked slightly in the seats, then, as Vic adjusted acceleration helix, they relaxed comfortably. Mission begun.

Mission 1572 on the schedule of the Scouting Patrol; Number 29 in Vic's personal Service Record back in Sandstorm, the last page of which was headed "Circumstances of Death — Posthu-

mous Citations — Provision for Dependents." Not many Service Records could count that high. When a man passed his twentieth mission, they began calling him "Lightning" Ching Lung or "Safety-First" Feuerbach or "Two-Blast" Bonislavski. You had to hang some such nickname on a man who, mission in, mission out, came back with three-fourths of his skin missing or some weird virus that made the medics dither and dream up whole new pathologies—but a man who *always* came back. Until, of course, there was that one time—

They called Vic "Unkillable" Carlton, and there were only two Scouts now shooting the ether who had longer active service. One of his very few ambitions was to be the Senior Scout of Space and wear the gold uniform that went with the rating. It meant that you never paid for anything anywhere, that you walked through Patrol cordons, that you were practically a one-man parade wherever you went. That would be nice, Vic thought; it was childish and garish, but it gave a man some sort of goal at this stage of his life. It meant that even in the Scouts who were the chosen of the Patrol, in turn the chosen of the galaxy's male population, you were still unique. It also meant that one day you might cut your throat while shaving with a safety razor.

Cute idea, the Scouts. Economical. Instead of losing thirty or a hundred highly-trained scientists at a clip, civilization, at most, would lose three men. True, the three would be rather unusual men with remarkable qualifications; but in a galaxy swarming with youths thirsty for a nice suicidal-type job in adventurous surroundings with a little glory, fair pay and *plenty* of room for advancement, the three would be replaced. And Honor-Rolled.

A Patrol cruiser happens to run across a previously uncharted star which is the one-in-a-thousand with a family of planets. Spectroscopic observations are made; and, if the cruiser has the time, robotjets are sent out to circle one or two of the more likely-looking worlds and make automatic observations on their atmospheres, ground conditions, evidences of intelligent life and the like. If there are no signs of an indigenous civilization anywhere, the cruiser goes on about its business and reports its findings to Sandstorm HQ at the earliest opportunity.

Sandstorm files the information along with a mass of deductions by physicists, chemists and biologists. Five years later, say, it becomes necessary to make a more detailed examination of one of the planets. Maybe the surface promises interesting mineral deposits; maybe it's a good spot for

a fueling station or Patrol outpost or a colony; maybe it's just that someone important is curious.

Three available Scouts—one A, one B and one C Scout—are alerted. They are briefed for a month on all data handy, given the best ship and equipment that can be built, wished lots and lots of luck and sent off. If they aren't back in ninety days, terran time, a heavy cruiser crowded to the stern jets with fancy weapons and brilliant minds goes after them to find out how they were knocked off. If any or all of them return in the prescribed time, their reports are examined and, on the basis of their experiences, an expedition is organized to do whatever job is necessary, from mapping the site of a colony to laying the foundations of an astronomical observatory.

The Scouts are sitting ducks. Oh, sure, their motto is "Take No Chances" and Scout Regulations 47 to 106 deal with safety measures to be observed. They are supposed to wander about the new planet with recording instruments, getting first-hand, on-the-spot data. That's all the books say they're supposed to do. And back in the academy—

"Back in the academy," Lutz confided to O'Leary as, outside the orbit of Pluto, they prepared to switch to the interstellar jets that would sweep them to their

destination at several times the speed of light, "back in the academy, they told us three-fourths of all Scout casualties are caused by carelessness or disregard of the safety regulations. The commissioners said that as discipline improves and more men adhere closely to regulations, casualties will inevitably go down."

"They will, huh?" O'Leary glanced round at Carlton and sucked in his lower lip. "I'm right glad to hear that. It's nice to know that casualties are going down. I'll take a commissioner's word against nasty statistics any old time. *Down*, huh?"

Harry Lutz completed his sight and handed the instrument to O'Leary for checking. "Sure. We function simply as an advance-information crew. At the first hint of danger we're supposed to clear 'Better lose your bonus than lose your life.'

"And outside that fat bonus for a full scouting period on a planet, what other compensations are there to this wacky job?" O'Leary nodded at Carlton. "Objective lined up, Vic. We can shoot. You try coming back from a mission with a scarey story, boy; you'll find yourself demoted to watchdog duty in the Patrol before you can say Aldebaran Betelgeuse Capricorn. Or take that last mission I was on. Nothing dangerous on the planet—nothing, that is, that wanted to do us harm. But there

was a bird thing with funny wings which generated a high-frequency sound wave as it flew. Pure biological accident, but it happened to be on exactly the same frequency as our supersonic pistols. Yeah."

He breathed heavily and stared through the control levers. The other two men watched him closely. "First time we saw it was the day Jake Bertrand was making a geological survey outside the ship. It flew down and lit on a rock—it was curious, I guess—and Jake dropped dead. Hap MacPherson, the commander, ambled out to see why Jake had fainted. The bird thing got scared and flew away, so Hap dropped dead, too. I was inside the ship and noticed where the sound meters were pointing; I figured it out. After I had me a good round look at the horizon and made sure there was nothing flying anywhere, I dragged the two brain-curdled corpses in and went back to Base. I don't know whether they decided to wipe out the bird things, send a colony down with a new kind of head-shield or what. But they gave me my bonus."

Silence. Harry Lutz started to speak, looked at his companions and stopped. He wet his lips and leaned back in his seat. "Gee," he said at last in a small, wondering voice.

"All right, O'Leary," Vic rapped out. "If you're through with

your Horror Stories for Young Recruits we can move. Stations for interstellar shoot!"

"Station B manned," O'Leary said, grinning so that his teeth showed and the corners of his mouth didn't turn up.

Harry Lutz gulped and straightened his shoulders inside the blue jumper. "Sta—" he started and had to begin again. "Station A manned. Interstellar j-jets away."

Nope, you can't fool the Scouts. They know they're sitting ducks. All the same, Vic decided, Lutz and O'Leary were good for each other. When you made a bounce after a trip where Death had dug a humorous forefinger in your ribs and slapped your shivering back—about the best thing you could find on such a bounce was a younger man who knew less than you did, who needed guiding, whose fear was actually greater than yours because it was latent and had, as yet, hit nothing tangible to set it off.

O'Leary was coming out of himself, thinking less of his own problems and more of the youngerman's. And Lutz wasn't being harmed either: if some stories could frighten him enough to make him an unreliable companion, the real thing was no place to discover it. Better find it out now, here, where steps could be taken to protect the other two. In twelve years of Scouting, Vic Carlton had concluded that the only man who didn't scare at what

the missions encountered was either too phlegmatic to be useful or else a true lunatic: the normal man was afraid, but tried to handle the source of his fear. Let Lutz find out what they were likely to be up against: his survival chances would be the better for it.

"Oh, it's not such a bad life at that," Steve O'Leary admitted as, the interstellar shoot under way, they were relaxing in the spherical space which served as combination pilot house, living quarters and recreation room. "A month for briefing, two months—at maximum—for the round trip, a month on the planet of mission. If you're lucky, the whole duty period takes no more than four months, after which you get a full thirty days' leave—over and above any hospital time. Pay's good and the glamor-struck women are plentiful: what more can a man ask?"

"Besides," Lutz hunched forward eagerly, transparently glad of his colleague's change of mood. "Besides, there's the *real* glory—being the first humans to setfoot on the soil of the planet, the first men to find out what each world is like, the first—"

"That part they can have," O'Leary told him curtly. "The first humans on each world—*hah!* The first funerals!"

Vic Carlton leaned back in his plastic chair and chuckled.

"What's the matter, Steve—did the commissioner flog you into the ship? You didn't have to make the bounce; you could have dis-enrolled."

"When I'm only five months away from A Scout rating, double pay and retirement privileges? Not that I'll ever have sense enough to retire: the first O'Leary was a romantic bonehead and the male line has bred true. There was an O'Leary who got himself blown apart in the stratosphere back in the days when they were trying to ride to the moon on liquid oxygen; an O'Leary was navigation officer on the Second Venusian Expedition one hundred and fifty years ago—the expedition that fell into the sun. Science may come and Intervention may go, but the O'Leary's will go on sticking their heads inot nooses forever. Amen."

They all laughed at his lugubrious nods, and Lutz said: "I only hope all my missions will be as dangerous as this one! The star is a yellow type G, just like our sun, and the planet—"

"The planet's only three-tenths of a point off Earth-type!" the B Scout broke in, his mood shifting again. "I know. That's what I told those jokers back in Sandstorm. But listen, boy, that planet and that star are around the Hole in Cygnus—do you know what that means? There hasn't been a single planet scouted in that area, let alone colonized. All

anybody knows about the Hole in Cygnus are somebody else's theories. Ask any scientist why there are so few suns in the area, why matter behaves the way it does out there, what might have happened to that cartographic unit that got itself lost five or six years ago, and he'll tell you to go excavate your head. One consolation, though; if we don't come back, there'll doubtless be a full-dress investigating expedition. Makes you feel good, doesn't it Vic?"

Carlton shrugged, turned back to his book. He couldn't decide which was worse—Lutz with his callowness, his fumbling inexperience, or the older man whose wry humor flowered so easily into bitterness stemming from obvious fear. For such a mission, he thought, the Scouts might have reversed an ancient rule and allowed him, as commander, to choose his own men.

Although, on his own initiative, whom would he have chosen? A nice dependable B Scout like Barney Liverwright who had been knocked off around Virgo six months ago? An up-and-coming C Scout, full of blood and guts, like Hoagy Stanton who was even now dying on Ganymede in a room which the pathologist dared not enter for fear of a virus which might seep through any immunization procedure, any protective clothing?

No, you took what you got,

what there was available—what there was still alive. Even on the mission to the Hole in Cygnus, the commander took the men assigned to him, and, Vic thought, watching them as the ship's chronometer told the passage of days and weeks which only it record out here in black space, he didn't have such a bad crew at that.

A tight comradeship developed that he had known before. The three men came closer and, despite their cramped quarters and the natural irritations arising from their log-book routine, felt the blood of friendship quicken.

Lutz in particular became more sure of himself as he was openly accepted by the other two. Vic watched him, his small dark head like a planet beside O'Leary's huge red sunburst as the two men beat out the measures of a sloppily sentimental ballad currently popular among the Scouts. He grinned at Harry Lutz's tearful tenor winding its melancholy around Steve O'Leary's stanchion-shaking bass.

*"No more to the stars will
I go,
No more a smooth jet will
I know;
Through spendthrift days, a
maiden's praise
Will hold me in thrall.
I'll go my ways, and end
my days*

*On some mould'ring ball.
No more to the stars will I
go—
O Lads!
No more to the stars will
I go."*

It hardly applied to Kay, Vic decided. "A maiden's praise—" That was hardly what he got from her.

Kay was critical: Kay was strength seeking strength, not a limp flag of a female searching for a strong male staff. With her, for the first time, he had begun to examine the internal forces which had driven him into one of the most dangerous and least rewarding services ever organized by humanity.

That night when he'd come tardily to their date outside Sandstorm's swankiest restaurant and said casually, belligerently, "Just signed the papers for Mission 1572. Adventure done got between us again, girl."

"There's nothing wrong with adventure," Kay had commented slowly, after turning away from him long enough to do something rapid to her face. "Every young man must measure himself against obstacles too big for his fellows. That's how the race advances, that's how new governments are created. It gets to be a perpetuated adolescence when it leads to nothing fundamentally constructive; when it's pursued for its own sake."

"The Scouts don't pursue adventure for adventure's own sweet sake," Vic had growled. "The Scouts have initiated every colony in the galaxy—they've been responsible for every outpost in the stars."

She laughed. "The Scouts! Vic, you're talking of a service; I'm discussing the individuals in it. When a man of your age has nothing more to show for his life but a few scars and a dozen tarnished medals—I only know that as a woman, I want a strong, steady and reliable man. I don't want to marry a boy of thirty-two."

"You're saying," Vic went on doggedly, "that pioneers, revolutionaries and adventurers are not mature men. In essence, you feel that the race advances because of its cases of arrested development. Right, Kay? Isn't that what you really think, that adolescence is the period of experiment and excitement—and maturity, the period of settled stodgy dullness where you cultivate your ulcers instead of your mind?"

He remembered the way she had stared at him, then dropped her eyes as if caught in a fib. "I—I don't know how to answer that, Vic. It seems to me that you're talking like a little boy who wants to be a fireman and is secretly very much ashamed of his Dad who works for a fire insurance company, but I could be wrong. I know that with your

ten years plus in the Scouts, you could get a commissioner's appointment by asking for it, and that it would be just as exciting to plan missions and prepare younger men for their dangers as rocketing out on them yourself. But I don't want you to give up active duty for me, or even for our possible family, if you haven't grown up enough to want it yourself."

"You mean grown *old* enough, Kay."

She gestured impatiently and turned to examine her hair in the mirror. "Let it go," she said, winding an intricate curl with complete concentration. "I never can see what there is about this discussion that upsets you so. Either you want to settle down and have a family—or you don't. When you decide, I'll be very much interested in hearing from you. Now let's see if *Emile's Oasis* has that band in from Earth yet."

He held the door open for her, irritably trying to decide why these conversations always left him with the feeling that he had committed some unpardonable social blunder which she had been gracious enough not to comment upon.

Looking back now, he found he still could not be critical. He found himself wondering what he was doing out here, sharing living space with two strangers

named Harry Lutz and Steve O'Leary.

What was mission 1572, what was the first scouting expedition to the Hole, as compared to Kay's soft presence and a youngster in whom they would both appear again? The urge that filled him—the hunger to found a family—was incredibly ancient, and every cell in his body had evolved to respond to it. Sitting watchful in the deep control chair, he writhed inside his stiff blue uniform.

And then a light in front of him flashed redly.

"Scouts to stations," Vic bawled. "On the double, there—on the double! Star of mission on the point! Stations for switch to planetary jets." He was calm again, and sure of himself: a mission chief.

"Station B manned," O'Leary rapped out, jolting into his seat and pulling a long bank of switches open.

"Station C manned," Lutz's voice was indistinct through the remains of a quiet supper he'd been enjoying in the galley. "Planetary jets away!"

Vic's eyes raked across them, considered the stellar map spread in front of him, noted the gauge needle palpitating in its circular prison, and checked the relay near his right hand for maximum gap.

And double check.

"Planetary jets away," he

called. "Planetary jets away, away. Jets away!"

They came into a system of eleven planets whose sun's spectroscopic reading was remarkably similar to that of Sol. Between the second and third planets there was one asteroid belt; between the eighth and ninth, there was another. Three of the planets were ringed—one both horizontally and vertically like a gyroscope—and only one world, the fifth from the sun, supported life.

"Could swear it was Earth if I didn't know better," Harry Lutz marveled as he looked up from an examination of the mission-planet.

O'Leary nodded. "Three-tenths of a point off Earth-type is pretty close. Slightly smaller diameter, oxygen and nitrogen balanced almost on the dot, only two degrees difference in the average equatorial temperatures. And *still* the exploring ship couldn't find any evidences of intelligent life. Hey Vic—according to Cockburn's Theory of Corresponding Environmental Evolution, shouldn't there be a creature down there who, at the least, approximates paleolithic man?"

The A Scout, wearily watching the transvisor click off the remaining million miles, moved his shoulders up expressively.

"I could give you a guess anywhere but in this gap in the wide open spaced. Sure, the biology of a planet that close to Earth phys-

ically should have produced an intelligent biped with the beginnings of a machine civilization—but who knows about the Hole in Cygnus? Take those white horrors out there."

They followed the direction of his arm pointing up at the planet-studded telescanner. Here and there in this system, between planets and upon them, floating free in empty space and clustered about the yellow primary, wee seemingly tiny networks of white, dead-pale filaments extending for what were actually hundreds and thousands of miles. Like the broken webs of immense and ugly spiders they looked, uninterested in gravitation and resembling nothing in a logical cosmos.

"Don't try, Harry," Vic warned Lutz, who was feverishly leafing through an immense volume on the control desk. "You won't find them listed in Rosmarin's *Types of Celestial Bodies*. All that we know about those things is that they are there—everywhere in the Hole—and they're too dangerous for the best stuff we've been able to make up to now. Any ship that gets too snoopily close to them, goes out—pouf! It just isn't around any more. Our orders are: MAKE NO ATTEMPT REPEAT IN CAPITALS UNDERLINED MAKE NO ATTEMPT TO EXPLORE WHITE CLUSTERS AND ANY

OTHER PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS PECULIAR TO HOLE IN CYGNUS."

O'Leary snorted. "That's just this trip. After we get back—if we do—someone at Base will scratch his head and wonder what those white clusters can possibly be made of. So they'll shake our hands, give us a couple of box lunches and a new ship, and say 'Would you mind looking into this matter and seeing if it is really as dangerous as rumored—taking no unnecessary chances of course? And it would be sort of nice if one of you could make it back in time for the Solarian Convention of Astro-Physicists in January!'"

They guffawed, Lutz on a slightly higher note than the other two. "See!" O'Leary slapped his back. "I told you. Once we get close to the planet of mission, stop manicuring your nails!"

The planet was enough like Earth to bring on a severe case of homesickness. True, there were only four continents, and true, there was no dainty moon reigning over the warm nights; but the seas were sapphire enough for a man to lie on their white beaches with a bottle of whiskey and get drunk without opening the bottle, and the clouds pushed their curling bellies across a subtly tinted sky unaware of the glorious things poets could do with them. Here and

there, a perfect island poised above the noiseless indigo waters, waiting for a painter to whom to give itself.

Tall trees boiled up the sides of mountains, lush grass waved on the uncombed prairies. Deserts sweltered their immense length of golden moistureless sand; and, in the North, a huge ice floe precipitated Spring by plunging into the Polar Sea with a wild shriek of freedom.

But on all the land, and in all the seas, they saw no living thing move.

"Like the Garden of Eden," Harry Lutz breathed, "after the Fall."

O'Leary looked at him, bit his lip. "Or Hell, before it."

After they landed, Vic assigned investigative watches. Much easier than the nerve-wracking space watch, the investigative watch was, at this stage of their mission, much more crucial. Both Scout Regulations and their own appreciation of safety-first measures demanded that the most painstaking examination possible be made of the planet while they were still inside the ship. Not only did the ground have to be checked for such topographic capers as earthquakes, floods and volcanoes, not only did the possibility of dangerous sub-microscopic life require careful consideration on so Earth-like a planet; but also—especially here in the Hole—they must be on the look-

out for the completely alien, the peculiar deadliness without precedent—up to now.

Not until all these precautions had been taken and the log-book carried to the moment of landing did Vic realize he hadn't thought of Kay for ten—or was it fifteen?—hours. Kay Summersby was just one more blonde adventure that hadn't quite worked out, another backdrop in his memory—a little more important, a little more protracted than the rest. His responsibilities—the mission—his men—

"Hey, Vic," Steve O'Leary frowned up from the telescaner. "Do you know there's a white tentacle thing on the other side of the planet?"

The mission commander grunted, moved to the side of the B Scout and scratched his chin at the instrument.

"Black Space!" he growled. "What would you call it? Doesn't seem to be alive, doesn't move, doesn't have any visible connection with the ground: just hangs there, hurting the eyes. Makes me think of an unhappy hour someone ripped up and threw away."

O'Leary pulled at his fingers. "Yeah. I don't like it, and I don't want to see it. According to regulations we're supposed to stay at least a full jet-trail length from these babies—and here this thing is a stinking 7500 miles

off in a straight line through the planet."

"That's just our own bad luck," Carlton told him. "It's on the planet of mission, and our mission orders always move ahead of Scout Regulations. Just remember to keep your distance on exploratory trips. Here that, Lutz?"

The C Scout nodded. "When do we start the trips, Vic? If there's anything dangerous on this unearthly paradise, I'll eat my helmet from the antenna down. I'd like to feel some ground slapping at the soles of my feet."

His superior shook his head.

"Take it easy, boy, take it slow and easy. On a strange planet, all you get for hurrying is a sooner grave than your neighbor. And if there's anything dangerous on this world that you don't know about when you step out of the lock, why, you won't have to eat your helmet. Because it will eat you, helmet, radio phones and all. Now relax and get back to that telescanner. There must be *something* alive here besides trees, grass and potatoes."

But there wasn't. At least they couldn't find anything though they spelled each other at the telescanners, nudged the beam back and forth over the four continents and peered at the screens until their eyes writhed with fatigue. They found minute one-celled forms in the specimens of air, soil and water the ship's au-

tomatic dredges picked up. O'Leary's shout brought the other two tumbling out of their bunks the day he thought he saw a bird (it turned out to be only a leaf tortured by the wind); and a few large green balls they noticed scudding about excited their interest until the scouts decided from their aimlessness and lack of sensory apparatus that they were over large spores of some plant.

They saw no herbivores cropping the rich vegetation, no carnivores slinking behind them for a spring. The seas held no fish, the woods no termites, the very earth itself no earthworms.

"I don't get it," Vic growled. "The botany of this planet is sufficiently close to Earth's to indicate a terrestrial zoology. Where is it? There's no creature out there large enough to have eaten all the others. So-o-o—"

"So?" Steve O'Leary prompted, watching his chief closely.

"Maybe it's something *small* enough to have done the job. A virus, say. A complex molecule halfway between the animal and mineral kingdom, something not quite alive but a million times more dangerous than anything that is."

"But Vic, wouldn't I have hit it with the electron microscope?" Harry Lutz spread his hands nervously. "And whatever I muffed—well, the robot eye is still classifying five thousand speci-

mens a minute. If a virus did for the birds and beasts here, we'd have come across at least one culture by now."

"Would we? If it were a virus that couldn't adapt to plant life, it might not be very active—or very numerous—at the moment. Then again if we did turn up a specimen, how would we know?"

"The robot eye—"

Vic Carlton grimaced, "*The robot eye!* One way, Lutz, not to grow old in this service is to believe everything the manuals tell you about the equipment. Sure, the robot eye attached to the electron microscope makes a fine pathologist. But all the robot eye has behind it is a robot memory—a file of every microscopic and sub-microscopic form of life which, in the parts of the galaxy explored up this date, have been found inimical to man. If it sees something enough like one of the items in the file to close a ten-decimal relay, we're warned. And it's warned us of a dozen or so species on this planet which it turns out our stuff can handle. But there's never yet been anything like a robot imagination. Your little machine, Harry, can't scratch its mounting and say 'Now, I don't like the looks of that baby there, harmless though it may seem.' Whenever a robot eye hits something completely out of its memory file, you know what happens."

"Yeah." O'Leary chuckled and swung himself up to his bunk. "Three corpses in Scout uniforms and, after the investigative expedition, maybe another item for the eye's robot memory. That's the way we learn, Lutz, old soak: trial and error. Only, me brave young C Scout, we're the trials and—ever so often—we're the errors too." He lay back on the bunk, and, as his huge red head disappeared from view, they could hear his deep voice caroling, "*Oh, I'm the bosun tight and the midshipmite—*"

Lutz looked unhappy as the other man slid into his morbid humor. The enforced seclusion aboard the little ship, from which he could see the gloriously free miles of acreage which surrounded them, had not done Steve O'Leary any particular good. He was too long in the service to question discipline, especially as regarded safety measures; but his subconscious could whisper irritably, and rumors of fear leaped irresistibly upwards in his mind.

More than ever, Vic felt himself drawn to the younger man. At least Lutz wasn't riding a recent scare: he had no idea, as yet, how cold his back could get.

"Look," the mission commander said kindly. "I'm not saying that there is a bug out there waiting to knock us off. I don't know. Maybe out here in the Hole, there's some radiation effect

which inhibits the evolution of complex animal forms. Maybe. I'm just saying that we keep looking and keep guessing until we feel we've exhausted every possibility of danger. *Then*, when we finally take a stroll outside the ship, we wear space-suits with both Grojen shielding and Mannheim baffles."

O'Leary's head came up out of his bunk again. "Hey!" he said disappointedly. "That much weight and we'll have to use electrical medullas to walk. I was looking forward to a hop, skip and jump under my own power. A little run across the ground would feel awful good."

He shut up and lay down under Vic's thoughtful glare. And it was the thought behind the glare that made Vic tell him the day they were ready to begin exploring the surface:

"I'm taking Lutz with me. We want the man in the ship to know what to do in case something pops. So you're elected, Steve."

The redhead watched them struggle into cumbersome, equipment-laden space-suits. He kneaded huge hands into his hips. "That's not customary, Vic, and you know it. Man on a bounce is the first one through the lock."

"If the commander sees it that way," he was told curtly. "I don't. You'll get your exercise later. Meanwhile, I want you to sit over those jets like a runner

in a hundred-yard dash. If we get into trouble and you can help us, fine; but if it looks at all tight or too unusual, remember the primary purpose of the mission is to gather information about the Hole. So you cut and run."

O'Leary turned his back and began working the air-lock. "Thanks, pal," he muttered. "I can see myself back in Sandstorm swearing to the boys that you gave me exactly those orders. I can see myself."

They climbed down the ladder and started across the surface. Vic, in the lead, was being very cautious; behind him, Harry Lutz sweated, stumbled and cursed in the huge suit with which even a year's training had not thoroughly familiarized him.

The commander stopped in what looked like a grove of chest-high elm trees. "Take it easy, Lutz," he suggested. "You're carrying a lot of weight and you can't possibly move it all correctly. The trick in using an electrical medulla is not to let your right hand know what your left is doing. I know you had enough workouts in those things back at the academy to use the right fingers on the right buttons. It'll be second nature if you give it a chance. Just relax and take in the scenery: concentrate on what you want to do, where you want to go—not how you want to do it. And once you stop thinking about them, your fingers will take

care of the medulla-switches for you. They've been educated to do the job."

He heard the C Scout take a deep breath through the radio phones. Then, as Lutz looked about him and relaxed visibly, his pace became more regular, the movements of the suit--weighted down as it was with Grojen shielding, Mannheim baffles and intricate operating apparatus— even and controlled. Lutz had managed to shift his thoughts from the motor to the conscious level; once that was done, he could be of maximum assistance while his fingers played over the proper switches inside their enormous metal mittens.

Good kid, Vic smiled to himself. Lots of rookies flopped about for days after they had occasion to use electrical medullas on actual mission work. Lutz had enough control to overcome the inevitable panic resulting from walking on a strange world for the first time in a garment that was essentially a robot. He caught on fast. He tried hard.

That's the way I'd like my son to—Vic shut the thought off. There was work to do. And a younger, more experienced man to watch. *Still*—

They picked their way through the miniature trees, Lutz now striding along easily, and up a slight rise in the ground. They stood at the top of the small hill finally and looked around while

luxurious branches waved in the direction of their stomachs.

From the stern mountains in the distance to the stream dodging shrilly about rusty old rocks nearby the land on which they stood yawned under a summer sun. Pink and blue grasses stretched and waved at each other. Mist rolled out of the huge lake a mile or so away.

Lutz chuckled inside his helmet. "Always did want to see what a vacation paradise looked like before the real estate boys moved in!"

"If they ever do. See anything moving here right now?"

"Well that—and these." Harry Lutz indicated the towering bramble forest to their right and the dwarf trees around them.

"Plants. Trees and bushes bending with the wind, waving with the breeze. Nothing like a rabbit, say, breaking cover as we step over his burrow, or a bee skimming along and looking for an appetizing flower. No creatures like bugs working the soil, no birds flying overhead and considering the possibilities of bug dinners."

"But we know that already—from the telescanner."

"I know," the mission commander scraped a metallic mitten along his helmet. "But why? The plants aren't carnivorous: with minor alterations in chemistry and morphology, you might ex-

pect to find them on Earth. I tell you I don't like it, Lutz. Why shouldn't this planet have a zoology?"

"Maybe all the animals went into the Hole," Lutz suggested brightly.

Carlton stared at him. "You know," he began, "you may really have something there.. of course, the Hole in Cygnus is an astronomical term," he went on hurriedly. "But there's a lot out here they never heard of on Mount Palomar or Sahara University either. 'Maybe all the animals went into the Hole.' What about *that*—"

"Hey, Vic!" O'Leary's voice from the ship. "Green ball—one of those spore-things—rolling straight for us."

"From where?"

"You should be able to see it in a moment. Due north of that mountain range. There! See that speck coming through those twin peaks?"

The two Scouts outside the ship unsheathed supersonics and crouched as the speck grew into a dot and then into a ball of green hurtling at an almost unbelievable speed.

"Better go back?" Lutz asked nervously.

"We'd never make it—not with that baby traveling as fast as it is. Just keep still and keep down: I've an idea that the solution—"

"More of 'em," Steve O'Leary's voice cut in excitedly. "Two bowl-

ing up in a line from the southwest. I don't think they're spores at all; I think they're intelligent and mighty like animules. And they all—Hey-y-y! I just located the mother-lode with the tele-scanner. Guess where?"

"Let's play games another day," Vic told him.

"From that mess of white tentacles touching the planet on the opposite side. A whole flock of green balls just boiled out. Could those tentacles be alive, have sense-organs? Doesn't seem logical, though, when you consider a couple of them are floating in empty space—"

"Forget the tentacles, O'Leary, and concentrate on the green blobs for a while. I believe we started all this excitement—Lutz and I—by walking out of the ship. Stand by the jets for a scram—with or without us."

"Not on your rating. That's final, Vic! Either you boys fight your way back in or I come out to join you."

Carlton bit his lip. The green ball was almost overhead now, its smooth, completely featureless surface flickering most oddly. That was always the trouble with a man making a bounce. He fluctuated between abysmal fright and mountainous bravado, both nothing else than a simple fear of being afraid—and both always coming up at the wrong times. Right now, he wanted a subordinate who could under-

stand the supreme importance of the first mission to the Hole, who could appreciate a situation where information might be a thousand times more important than the lives or opinions of others—and who would be rock-steady in an emergency instead of skittering about with a private neurosis.

"All right, O'Leary. Secondary attack precautions. Get into a spacesuit and man the bow gun. Robots on the others. Switch to full visiplate hook-up. But keep those jets ready to blast!"

"Uh—commander," Lutz broke in. "Three of those balls overhead. More coming. But they're ignoring us: they just bang around the ship."

Vic Carlton stared upward. He'd never seen anything quite like these spheres. Their color might argue for chlorophyll, but they were far too animate, too purposeful, to have botanical origins. Vehicles in which sat sentient organisms? That might account for the lack of such things as eyes and locomotive appendages. But, then, where was the jet-trail or any other evidence of a propulsive device? And surely the way they expanded and contracted seemed to point to an intrinsic life of their own. That was really odd, now—

"Could they be breathing?" the C Scout wondered aloud.

"No. Too irregular for respiration. I'd say. Just keep still Lutz

and wait it out. This is the hardest part of a mission, boy, but patience has saved more lives than all the Grojen shielding ever made."

They waited, inside their great suits, while the number of balls increased to twelve, all shooting about the ship in straight, determined lines. Evidently, Vic reflected, while they sat still, they went unnoticed.

Suddenly, one of the spheres paused outside the air-lock.

"Seems to know its way around," O'Leary commented from the ship. He laughed twice, the second time after a few moments pause. "I'm getting jumpy Vic."

"Don't," he was advised. "They may be smart enough to know how we enter and leave the ship, but they can't have seen many space-ships if they get this close to a fully armed one. Sit on your nerves, Steve: once they thin out and we can get back, we might try communicating with them. Although they don't seem to be responsive. You're wearing side-arms I hope?"

"Supersonics. And a heavy blaster across my lap. Blow a hole through the hull if I use it, but if I have to—Say! Is that baby doing what I see through the visiplate?"

It was. The ball had withdrawn a little distance from the ship and came rushing towards it rapidly. It bounced gently, soundlessly,

off the hull, retired and repeated the process. The horizontal lines in which it moved and the insistent nature of its repetitious approach reminded the three Scouts of a fist knocking at a door.

Then—it disappeared!

They shook their heads and grimaced at the spot where it had last been in the midst of another rush at the airlock. It was gone, with no faintest emerald trace left behind on the lazy air. Around the ship, eleven balls shot back and forth, back and forth, in absolutely straight lines. But there had been twelve a moment ago!

"C-Commander, wh-what do you think happened?"

"Don't know, Lutz. But I definitely don't like it."

"Neither do I," O'Leary whispered in their radio phones. "This is one of those moments in a B Scout's life when he wonders what he ever saw in an A Scout rating to make him leave home and mama. I'd like to be back in— No! Vic, it's *impossible!* It couldn't—It—"

"What happened? Steve! What's going on?"

"The damn ball materialized inside the ship—just as I was reaching over to the—not five feet from me—made a rush at my head—almost got—" Steve O'Leary's voice came over in jerky snatches as if he were spitting out each fragment between jumps. "Chasing me all over the Control Room—no, you don't—caroming

off the bulkheads like a billiard—wait, I think I have a sight—"

A tremendous roar. O'Leary had used the blaster. Echo after echo piled crazily upon their ear-drums and a jagged hole flapped open near the nose of the ship as if it had been punched out.

"Missed! Could've sworn I had a clear sight—blast went practically head-on—don't know *how* I missed—now, maybe with a supersonic—well, what would you call *that?* Vic! It's disappeared again! Clean gone! I'm getting out of here!"

"Careful, Steve!" Carlton yelled. "You're panicky!"

There was no reply. Instead, the air-lock swung open, and Steve O'Leary, space-suited to almost twice his normal size, leaped out. He carried a supersonic in his left hand and a blaster in his right and he came out shooting. Eleven green balls converged on him, riding imperturbably through his blasts.

The two Scouts on the hill had leaped to their feet. They shot bolt after bolt of high frequency sound, sound which could dissolve any conceivable organic structure into its component chemicals. They might have been using water-pistols for all the effect they had.

A twelfth ball appeared directly in O'Leary's path. It began the size of an apple, and, almost before their eyes could register the change, had coruscated glaucous-

ly to the diameter of a lifeboat. A little in advance of its fellows, it shot at the B Scout.

It touched him.

And he screamed.

His scream seemed to have begun years ago and continue into the unguessable future. And then, the entire space-suit seemed to fly open and—not O'Leary, but his insides came out. Where a metallic figure had been running, covered with a Grojen shield and lightly draped with Mannheim baffles, there was now only stomach and spleen, liver and intestine, stretched fantastically, unbelievably into the shape of Steve O'Leary. The figure took another step, and the scream ululated out of human recognition. Then it stopped.

O'Leary was gone. And the green ball was gone.

The other balls had passed over the spot where Steve O'Leary had disappeared. Two of them disappeared in turn. Nine returned to the ship and continued their determined, whipping investigation.

Lutz was being violently sick inside his space-suit. Vic fought for self-control. *Had he or had he not seen the emerald ball change to a deep olive and then to the color of pouring blood just before it went out?*

"Listen, kid," he said rapidly. "Keep still, keep absolutely, perfectly still—no matter what happens. Don't even roll your eyes. I

think I know what those things are, and I don't think anything we have can stop them. Our only hope is to avoid attracting attention. So don't move until I give you the word. Got that?"

He heard Lutz's breathing become more regular. "Y-yes. commander. But don't they remember us shooting at them? And can't they see us standing here in plain sight?"

"Not if they're what I suspect. Relax, kid, relax as far back as you can. Remember, not a movement of any kind you can control. And no conversation for a while. Nothing. Just watch and wait."

They waited. They watched. They waited for hours, half-reclining in their immobile suits, while the green balls tore back and forth, appeared and disappeared silently, steadily, with unwavering purpose. They watched the blue line running the length of their precious ship—the line that proclaimed it a Scout vessel and able to outrun anything in space—they watched the blue line dissolve into the gray metal around it under the thick suds of twilight. And they made no movement, no, not even when a bloated sphere of green expanded in front of them suddenly and seemed to consider them under invisible optic organs before losing interest and scudding away.

That was the hardest part, after all, Vic decided: not moving

even though the feeling that they were under surveillance increased with every second; not jerking suddenly, though most ancient instincts shouted that it was time to run, that this very moment they would be attacked by the unseeable.

He came to appreciate his companion's qualities in the course of the awful vigil: not many men could maintain that necessary exterior calm on the very knife-edge of extinction. *One good kid.*

They waited; they watched; they didn't move. And they thought about Steve O'Leary...

Finally, two of the balls rose and flew off to the north. An hour later, two more followed. The remaining five came to rest above the ship, forming the points of a rough pentagon.

"All right, Lutz," the A Scout murmured. "We can unbend—just a little! Six hours of daylight. We'll sleep two hours a piece, you first, one watching while the other takes a nap. That'll give us some rest before we make our play; and maybe in that time the five tumble bugs will decide to go home."

"What are they, commander?" What in the name of intergalactic space can they be?"

"What are they? A leak in the Hole in Cygnus. They're where all the animals went."

"I—I don't understand."

Carlton almost gestured impatiently, stopped himself just in time. "There's much that's peculiar about the Hole. Not merely the absence of ordinary celestial phenomena, the rarity of stars and such-like, but loopholes in natural law which you find nowhere else. A majority of modern theories consider this general area the starting-place of our particular universe; whether they begin with space warping in on itself because it got tired of standing around in time, or with one version or another of the explosion of a primordial atom—whatever they begin with these days, they work in the Hole in Cygnus somehow as the place where it all occurred."

"Yes. Ever since Boker came out here two hundred years ago and discovered the sectors of chronological gap."

"Right, kid. Now I don't claim to know how the universe started. But I'm willing to bet my next meal in Sandstorm against the dust on your right boot that this was where it did. And from the looks of things, the area around Cygnus never recovered. It remained a hole in space where all kinds of stuff that shouldn't be, is—and vice versa. That moment or millennium of creation tore it up plenty. And among the tears, among the cuts that were never healed, I classify those white tentacle thingumabobs all over this system."

"And the green balls came through the one on this planet from—from—"

"From someplace outside. From another universe which we can't reach or even imagine."

Lutz thought about that for a moment. "On another plane, you mean, commander?"

"On another dimension. The fourth, to be specific."

"But 'way back in the twentieth century they proved that the fourth dimension was time and we move through it!"

"I mean a fourth spatial dimension, Lutz. A universe where there's length, breadth, height—and, well, one *more* direction, besides. Time, too, but even a conceivable two-dimensional creature must have duration in order to exist. And that's the way to understand those babies: what they can do, what they can't, what happened to O'Leary and what hope we have of covering those sixty yards to the ship and taking off. Analogy. Think of a two-dimensional man."

"You mean width and length, but no height? Gee—I don't know. I guess we'd see his skin as a thin line around his skeleton and internal organs. And—wait a minute—he'd be able to move and see only on an absolutely flat surface!"

Carlton silently thanked the academy officials for entrance examinations that weeded out the least imaginative. "You're doing

fine. Now suppose we stuck a finger into this two-dimensional world. The man in it would see the finger as a circle—just as we see these creatures as spheres. When the tip had gone through his world and the finger proper was visible, he would feel the circle had grown larger; when we pulled the finger out, he'd say it had disappeared. If we wanted to eat him, say, we could hover above him while he ran from the place where he'd last seen us. Then pounce down in front of him, and he'd think we'd suddenly materialized out of thin air. And, if we wanted to lift him into our world, our space—"

"We'd pick him up by the skin and his insides would momentarily be the only part of him visible in his world." Lutz shivered involuntarily. "Ugh. Then those balls are sections of fourth-dimensional fingers—or pseudopods?"

"I don't know. I suspect, though, that these creatures are only fourth-dimensional equivalents of our very simple forms—anything from bacteria to worms—but still dangerous as death itself. I don't think they're very complicated animals on their world because they seem to have pretty elementary sense-perceptions. They don't hear us, smell us or feel us; and they only chase us when we move. That all adds up to a fairly primitive organism,

even in four dimensions. It would explain why there's no animal life on this planet, but plants of almost every kind: animals are motile, so they were chased and eaten; plants generally grow in one spot, so they were ignored."

"But, Vic, we have to move to get back in the ship!"

"We have to move, but not in straight lines. Not the way those balls move back and forth, not the way O'Leary moved. We'll run a purposely erratic course to the air-lock, we'll stop unexpectedly, we'll zigzag, we'll turn around and double on our tracks. It'll take up extra time, but I'm betting that our green chums haven't the sensory or mental equipment to solve a random movement fast enough."

"Poor O'Leary! It'll seem all wrong going back without that big loud redhead."

"We aren't going, kid, until we get inside that ship and flush those jets behind us. Now grab some sleep before we run out of night."

As the C Scout closed his eyes obediently, Carlton risked a glance at him. Tired, scared as hell, but still swallowing orders with alacrity, still willing to take chances. *One good kid*, he repeated to himself. *Wonder if he's started shaving yet. Nope—with that jet-black hair and creamy complexion a beard would be very obvious, even a couple of hours growth.*

Wonder who he has waiting for him back home. Probably only his mother; doesn't act like the kind of kid who's played around much with girls. Probably only the girl, the one he took to the graduation ball at the academy.

Wonder what Kay would think of Lutz—would she understand him?

Wonder who's waiting for O'Leary . . .

The green spheres above the ship were perfectly still, their smooth bodies ignoring even the stern night wind that roared down from the mountains. Asleep, in their own peculiar way? Or waiting?

Lutz and O'Leary: two good guys, Kay. Adolescents? Space-wash!

Vic let Lutz sleep for almost three hours before awakening him. It would take two to do this job right, and he wanted the younger man's nerves to settle as much as possible.

"I lost track of my nerves about five years ago off Sirius," he explained.

"All the same, Vic, all the same, you can't punish yourself like that! Why you won't even have a full hour yourself."

"It'll do me fine. Now just stand guard and whistle once—loudly—if anything is on the verge of popping. And whistle at the end of the hour."

He fell asleep instantly and

dreamlessly with the ease of the experienced Scout who has used his space-suit as a flophouse many times. He woke a moment before the hour was up, when the alarm clock buried in his subconscious went off.

Lutz was singing under his breath to keep himself company. Almost without sound, just enough of the words came through over the radio phones to make the song clear. Carlton listened to Lutz sing with all the loneliness, the longing, of the last man alive:

*"... and end my days
On some mould'ring wall.
No more to the stars will I
go—
O lads!
No more to the stars will I
go!"*

"First," the commander broke in cheerfully, "you need a maiden's praise, kid. To hold you in thrall. But you wouldn't understand that part."

"Sorry I woke you, Vic. I was just going to whistle. And when it comes to a maiden's praise, I do as well as the next guy. Had a tough time getting away for this mission, let me tell you!"

"Who—your sister? Or the girl next door?" This light banter would develop just the right mood for what they had to do.

"My sister?" Lutz laughed boyishly. "Hell, no. My wife."

Carlton was amazed. "Are you—are *you* married?"

"Married? I sincerely hope for the sake of my children that I am!"

"Well, I'll be—How many do you have?"

"Two. Two girls. The youngest, Jeanette, is only three months old. She's a blonde, like her mother."

"Yes," Vic mused. "Kay's a blonde. He daughter would probably—"

"Kay? Your wife, commander?"

"No. My fiancee," Vic told him stiffly. "Well, one good thing about marriage, Lutz; your dependents are well taken care of. The Scout finance department doesn't recognize engagement rings. I guess that's a comfort to a husband and father if he's knocked off somewhere in emptiness."

The C Scout looked down at the ship. "All five of them still there, commander. I'm ready to go any time you give the word."

There was a pause. "Look, Lutz," Carlton began awkwardly. "I'm sorry if—if—"

"No offense taken if none's given, Vic. Only thing, way back in my second year at the academy I decided that I wanted to get married, I wanted to have a family—and I wanted to be a Scout. All three. So you figure it out. Me, I find it hurts my head."

"All right, then; let's concentrate on what we have to do. When I yell we leap sideways and come down upon the ship in two converging arcs. Using medulla-switches, we can run twice as fast as a horse. We don't run more than two steps in a straight line if we can remember it—and we've got to remember it! First man in kicks the jets over. If the other man isn't in by the time the ship takes off, he's left behind. No second chance. no waiting a moment longer, no looking back. I think if we do this right, we can confuse them enough to get away together, but if we don't—remember that we can't help each other and that our records and interpretation *must* make it to Sandstorm. Check?"

"Check. And good luck, Vic."

"Good luck, Harry. And good running."

The A Scout looked around one last time to judge the ground he would have to travel. His fingers crept over the switches in the mittens, ready to galvanize the suit into a breakneck speed. "Now!" he roared, leaping off to the left. "*Play ball!*"

As he pounded down the slope, his speed and weight uprooting the tiny trees in his twisting path, he could see Lutz, far off to his right, zigzagging with him. They might make it. They might—

They got to twenty yards of the ship before the green balls

noticed them. And streaked straight for them without hesitation.

Carlton stopped, leaped backward, sideward and came around the stern of the ship in a great curve. Lutz was coming down the other side, his course resembling a drunk with rocket attachment. The air-lock gaped open between them. Immense balls sped by hungrily, almost touching, almost— Only eleven yards. Double back and leap forward again. Nine yards. Jump away from the ship and cut in at a sharp angle. Seven.

"Look, commander, I'm in—I made it!" Only six yards from the air-lock—only eighteen feet! —Harry Lutz lost his head. He came up in a tremendous broad-jump powered by the motor of the heavy suit. He aimed at the open door of the air-lock, evidently intending to catch it in mid-air and pull himself inside. But it was he who was caught in mid-air.

A green sphere materialized twelve feet from the lock and Lutz, unable to check himself, smashed into it. Almost before he began screaming, almost before he began to turn inside out, the remaining four balls had shot to the other side of the lock to observe or partake of the prey.

The way was clear for Carlton. He leaped inside, almost brushing the crimsoning ball—wondering whether he could have done

it if they hadn't caught Harry Lutz.

"Poor little Jeanette," he wept as Lutz's scream bit and clawed at his ear-drums, "poor kid, she's only three months old!" he cried as he pulled the red switch on the control panel and jumped away for a moment just in case. "Poor little blonde Jeanette, she's only a baby! She can't remember anything," he screamed in sympathy to Lutz's continuing scream as he swung balance-control, adjusted acceleration-helix, felt the ship whip up and outward with him—and continued to zigzag about the control room because you never knew, you just never knew about those green balls.

But when he had switched to interstellar shoot, and found Lutz's scream still in his ears, still rising in insane volume, when he found himself unable to stop leaping backward, forward, sideward, about the control room—he attached the main oxygen tanks to his helmet and turned on the automatic alarm.

A patrol ship got to him three days later. There was no air in the little vessel because, while the lock had closed automatically upon takeoff, the hole in the nose had never been repaired. But Vic Carlton, completely exhausted and with eyes like diseased tomatoes, was alive in a space-suit designed to *keep* a man alive under the most incredible condi-

tions. He had disconnected his helmet phones and when they hauled him out of his ship, he kept beating both mitten hands against his head in the region of his ears.

They gave him an anaesthetic in the patrol ship hospital and set a fast course for Sol.

"Poor little Jeanette Lutz," he whispered painfully just before he fell asleep. "She's only three months old."

"Are you sure you can pull him through?" a perspiring commissioner asked in the hospital on Ganymede. "Because if there's any danger that you can't, let's use a hypnotic probe. The information he's carrying is worth the risk of permanent damage to his mind."

"We'll pull him through," the doctor said, making unhappy early-morning grimaces as he washed his mouth with his tongue. "We'll pull him through all right. According to his charts, he's survived concentrated therapy before. No point in blowing out his brains with a probe when he'll be able to tell you everything you want to know in a week or two."

"I told them everything," Vic informed Kay three weeks later when he met her on the main floor of the Scout Operations Building. "I told them off, too. How can you expect a man to take a bounce, I said, when the Service itself won't? That's when the

Patrol big-brains decided that the Hole is still too dangerous for anything mankind has. They're going to wait a while before sending another exploring party there. Well. I said—"

He stopped as the elevator doors slid open and the crowd of Scouts surrounding the three helmeted ones in the center moved toward the double doors chattering and chafing.

"Look at Spinelli, fellows! He's dead already!"

"Poor Spinelli, his first command! Hey, Spin, this is the bounce Carlton wouldn't take! He musta known something!"

"Hey, Tronck! What're you looking so green about!"

"Steady there, Spinelli. You're a commander now!"

Vic's hand crept to his chest as the men passed. He fingered the gold star which glowed from the spot where, an hour before, a silver rocket had poised.

Kay touched the star, too. Her back was to the men marching to the ship, but her eyes shone into Vic's. "Commissioner Carlton! It sounds as if it was always meant to be just that. Alliterative, too! Oh, Vic, this is the way we said it would be—this is the way we both wanted it. You, with the fire still in you, knowing that you're

a grown man, knowing what you want—"

From the distance, they could hear the song:

*"If it's a girl, dress her up
in lace;
If it's a boy, send the——
off to space!"*

"Darling," she whispered, pressing his hand against her cheek. "We'll have lots of lace and lots of space. We'll have everything."

Vic didn't answer. He stood, ignoring her completely, as the three men sang themselves into the slender little ship with the long blue stripe. When the ground crew scattered with warning yells of "Jets away!! Jets away away, jets away!" he took one resolute step forward, stopped—and put his hands in his pockets.

Then the sudden scream and clatter of flame, dying almost before it had been felt; then the silver pencil up in the sky that left a thin line of brightest scarlet behind it. The ship was gone, and a cloud waddled over its trail, but still Vic stared upward. Kay said nothing.

When, at last, he turned back to her, his eyes were full of middle age.

The End

Now On Sale

CHARLES W. RUNYON'S NEW NOVELETTE **HAPPINESS SQUAD**
IN THE March **FANTASTIC**

Though it's unlikely that one influenced the other, at least four years before Brave New World first came out—that was in 1932—David H. Keller, M.D., anticipated one of the major themes in Huxley's brilliant satire on Utopia gone mad. For in the following short—first published in 1928—Keller also wonders about a future in which all babies are synthetic and couples prefer "companionate marriages." But where Huxley's Savage commits suicide rather than live in the Brave New World, Keller's young lovers think of something simpler—a "biological experiment" that no one has tried for a thousand years!

A BIOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Illustrated by FRANK R. PAUL

THE books have been tampered with! Ten of them are gone!"

The first Assistant Librarian of the Congressional Library rushed trembling into the office of his superior and, reaching the Librarian's desk, he repeated his startling statement.

The Librarian, who had taken thirty civil service examinations and been promoted thirty times in order to reach his present position, refused to be flustered by the news, and sharply reprimanded the subordinate for his unnecessary excitement.

"Make a list of the missing books, and report the facts to me. You know the routine method of doing things in this department. In the future, please adhere to it."

"But there is no routine, sir, no precedent for this. It is the first time that any books have been missing for several hundred years. You know that the rooms are never opened and the books never touched—and there is another thing. The assistant watchman who has been in charge of the books for the last year failed to report for duty and his monoplane is gone."



"Do as I tell you! Make an official report of the entire matter and I will investigate it. In the meantime, I will thank you if you will leave the room and allow me to continue my studies in mass education." There was a finality in his voice that definitely closed the discussion.

Though it was only eight in the morning, a young woman was out walking on the lawn of her sister's country estate. Now and then she looked anxiously at the sky where the large passenger planes were humming their way toward distant cities. She paid little attention to these, but finally a smile replaced her anxious expression, as a small monoplane came hurtling down from the blue and landed skillfully on the lawn. A young man jumped out and ran toward her and as he ran he cried:

"I have the books, Elizabeth! I have the books!"

The girl ran toward him, as she replied:

"I am so glad. Do they tell what we want to know? Were you able to read them?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her before he answered her questions.

"I believe so," he finally said, between the kisses. "Of course the language is peculiar and there are lots of words that I do not know. You see I have only been reading for two years, but I

brought along a good dictionary of obsolete words and I believe that we can work it out. It will be a lot of fun to do it together."

She looked at him trustfully.

"Yes, Leuson, that is the right word. From now on we are going to do everything together. I have all my things ready and, best of all, I am ready for the new life with you."

Without the loss of any time, he helped her pack her various bundles into the plane and then securely fastened her into the passenger's seat. He took the aviator's position in front of her. They were ready to start, but for some reason he delayed. It seemed that the man was not sure of the wisdom of the adventure they were starting on. They waited a little too long, for an older couple came out from the house and walked toward the monoplane. They were the celebrated biologists, Dr. Hardner Gowers and his wife, Dr. Helen Sellers Gowers. It was hard to tell which one was the more learned scientist. In their early life they had been poor but had attained both fame and wealth by the sheer force of their combined powerful intellects. Following their companionate marriage, they had assumed all responsibility for their sister, Elizabeth Sellers, and also had claimed the right to control the details of her daily life, much to the annoyance and disgust of that young lady, who wanted to do as she pleased,

when she pleased and as often as she pleased.

"Hullo, Leuson," called Dr. Gowers. "Going out riding with Elizabeth? The air looks pretty but Helen and I have been so busy lately that we have not been up in it for ages. We have been hunting for you, Beth. We have a great piece of news that I am sure will please you. Your sister and I have decided to apply for a baby!"

"About time!" replied the young lady, sarcastically. "After you have done everything else that you wanted to do, you finally make up your mind to apply for a child. You should have done that years ago."

"Now, Elizabeth," replied the older woman, "we have talked that over and over and you know that I just had to finish my special line of investigation before I could devote my time to a child. You have no idea what it means. Even with the most competent nurses it takes time. I have been fortunate in locating three very excellent women who have had a lot of experience with babies in the Government Nurseries, and we are asking for a four-year-old child. It will not be so hard on me than as it might be under different circumstances. Some women are even attempting to take care of a baby without help, but of course, they have never done any research work. I am willing to give as much as an hour a

day to the child and will do all I can for its future health and happiness."

"You see it is this way, Leuson," said her husband. "You and Beth are very young and naturally you cannot see the responsibility of applying for a child—it is something you cannot comprehend as we do. My wife has been very wonderful about it and has promised me repeatedly that she would join me in an application for a child just as soon as she completed her investigations into the life history of the *Cryptobranchus Alleghaniensis*. This work, in two hundred and ten moving picture reels, is now completed; when it was shown to the International Society of Biologists, they made her a life member, an honor that has never before been given to any woman. It is true that she spent over twenty years at this work, but she has enjoyed every minute of it. She is just entering middle age and is well qualified in every way to supervise the care of a child. We are able to employ the best of help and can buy the most modern electrical equipment. We will welcome the child and give it every possible social and educational advantage."

"That is fine, Dr. Gowers," said the young man, enthusiastically. "If you were in my place, what would you advise me to do?"

The old Doctor smiled paternalily, as he replied:

"Select an intelligent lady you

can harmonize with and hand in your application for your papers and arrange for the preliminary treatment. You have a position under the Government and no doubt your wife could secure a place in the same office; then you can have a companionate marriage. I believe in early marriages and shall be glad to help you in any way I can. It may be that by the time you are thirty-five you can apply for a baby."

"I shall be glad to avail myself of your help," replied the young man. "Now we shall have to be going so we can have a long day's trip."

"Don't get tired, Elizabeth," advised the older sister. "You know you have passed all the examinations and the day for your operation has been set for next month. It is a great honor and I want you to be in the best physical condition."

Amid the roar of the engine, Elizabeth called back:

"Good-bye, Sis. When we come back you will see us."

They were off.

The two doctors walked back into the house. The wife said:

"I am in earnest about this new work of being a Mother. I am going to arrange a perfect program that will keep the three nurses busy."

"You will make a wonderful Mother," replied her husband, with a far-a-way look in his sad eyes.

Rising rapidly into the air, the monoplane made certain circular movements and then started westward along the Potomac. Although the machine was capable of three hundred miles an hour, Leuson seemed satisfied with a much slower pace, and they did not reach Pittsburgh till late in the afternoon. At that time there were less than ten thousand people in that city for there was but little demand for coal or steel in the new age of atmospheric electricity and glass. Leaving the plane on the aviation field, the young people walked to the office of the local Judge. This official had been in office for so long that he had become careless of details and obsessed with the idea that he could not make a mistake. For this reason he did not thoroughly examine the papers Leuson handed him, but asked gruffly:

"So you want to enter into a companionate marriage?"

"Yes, sir," was the double reply.

"Are you able to support yourselves individually?

"Yes, sir."

"You have your permits, vaccination certificates, life insurance, health, accident, tornado, air and happiness insurance?"

"Yes, sir."

"You each consent to an immediate and complete divorce in case you are ever unhappy living together?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I pronounce you man and wife. Sign these papers so I can send them to the Central Matrimonial Office. Is this your first experiment?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was married eleven times before I could find a woman I could live with. I understand that is not an unusual experience."

The young people rushed from the office, and walked back to their plane. Leuson looked a little worried, as he said.

"I am sorry that I had to forge some of those papers, but let's go."

The monoplane, avoiding the usual air lanes, went steadily westward, finally resting on the grass of an isolated meadow among the peaks of the Ozark Mountains. There was sunshine here and a little singing brook and while three sides of the meadow were sheltered by dense woods, the other side was guarded by a sheer cliff of overhanging rock, which rose some hundreds of feet above the cleared field. The young people acted as though they were thoroughly at home. As a matter of fact, they had made frequent visits to this field and had thoroughly prepared, as far as they could, to make this place their home.

Traveling all day and night, they had reached the meadow just as the sun was first kissing the tree tops. They were tired, but

they were far too excited to rest, so they started at once to unload the plane and carry their packages up a narrow, winding mountain path which the boy had constructed, and which ended in a cave one hundred feet above the level of the field. After everything had been carried, the plane was put under the trees and covered with waterproof canvas. They never intended to use it again, but they felt that it might be useful in an unexpected emergency. Finally the necessary things were all done and the boy and girl, for they were little more, sat down to rest on the narrow rock shelf in front of the doorway of their new home. They dissolved a few synthetic food tablets in a pint of spring water and slowly sipped their meal.

They put a few pillows behind them and sat there looking toward the west. The girl shivered but it was from cold rather than from fear.

"Now, tell me, dear, just what you have really found out about it all."

He drew her closer to him as he started to talk.

"Of course we are just youngsters, Elizabeth, but I guess we are old enough to know our minds, and decide what we want. I have been reading a lot of the history of the thing and I was just fortunate enough to be able to find some real old books and take

them out of the Congressional Library.

"Years ago, when we first found each other and realized that we were in love and wanted to be different from other folks, we knew that unless we learned to read we should have to receive the same mass education that all the young people received. Even then we were tired of looking at the educational moving pictures and listening to the same lectures given over the radio. It was this that prompted us to seek positions where we could learn to read and have access to the old books. Do you remember how we used to talk about it? How in those back rooms in the Library were printed books that no one had read for centuries and yet which were carefully guarded under lock and bolt so no one would get them?

"It seems odd, but we found that it was a fact that the citizens of a supposedly free country have had no choice in their education or amusements for over a thousand years. Every home has its radio, its movie, its television box; but every fact and picture that came to them was approved of and censored by the National Board of Education and Amusement. No one had a right to have a private opinion; everyone had to think like everyone else. There was a gradual death of individuality. Whenever a change was desired in mass opinion or action, an educational propaganda was

started. Finally, all thinkers were engaged by the central government. If they wanted to make any statement to the world, they had to have their message passed by this National Board. The entire learning of past ages, put into books, was a closed secret, save to a few who were taught to read, that the art might not be entirely lost.

"As you know, we both were fortunate enough to secure this special education. Then finally my chance came and I was selected as the night watchman. After months of search, I located the books I wanted—and stole them and stole you. Now I want to tell you the history of this problem.

"This is June, 3928. A great many centuries ago life was very different in this world. Everything has changed during the last twenty centuries. But I want especially to talk about love, marriage and babies, and to give you some idea of the changes in these three important divisions of the human economy.

"Twenty centuries ago there were lots of babies and they were all born. That is just a four letter word that means nothing at all to you now, but at that time it was the only way whereby the existence of the human race could be maintained. A man and a woman married each other and in the course of time a baby was born to them. Strange as it may seem

to us now, the baby was the actual child of the two persons who called themselves its Father and Mother. These babies all reached the breathing stage of existence at the same age, they all looked alike, they all had the same average intelligence and it took a lot of care and love to raise them—also a lot of intelligence—and as a consequence, a great many of the little things died the first year. What I want you to understand is the fact that any two persons who were married had a right to have one child or a dozen. The license to marry automatically carried with it the right to have as many children as they wanted to. This was centuries before the National Child Permit Act was passed.

"There were so many babies in so many families in those days that it was quite a problem to raise them. The amount of detail and care each baby required must have been terrific. If a child was intelligently looked after twenty centuries ago, it took fully six hours a day of the Mother's time. At least so I have read in the old records. The condition is nicely illustrated in the old patents applied for at that time. Some are hard to understand but all seem to have for their object the lessening of the time that had to be daily spent on each baby. Life for parents in those days must have been one continual round of duty.

"Yes, I am satisfied that there must have been a lot of trouble twenty centuries ago with babies, having them the way they did and having to care for them. Then, too, there was such a scattering of the babies. Some families had a dozen and some had none or perhaps just one. Many of the babies were not well; they had a lot of diseases that we have not seen for over fifteen hundred years and some doctors were able to make a living just treating sick children. The sad part about it all was the fact that those who were wealthy and intelligent seemed to have the fewest children. It was only the poor and ignorant who had large families.

"Just about two thousand years ago a Judge, in what was then the United States, wrote a book about companionate marriage. I translated this into modern English and waded through it with a great deal of interest. Of course it is very far behind the times but we shall have to give the Judge credit for starting something. He had a law passed which allowed a man and woman to marry each other and live together as long as it was mutually agreeable to both of them. They were not supposed to have any babies born to them until they were fairly sure that they would want to live together for life.

"One hundred years later a law was passed to the effect that no woman was to have a child until

she and her husband secured a permit from the Baby Board, and it was thought that this would diminish the number of babies in poor families. All children were supposed to be born in government hospitals, and a woman was not admitted without her baby permit. Naturally, lots of babies were born surreptitiously without permits. It all worked out very unsatisfactorily.

"By the twenty-seventh century the human race was in a rather pitiful condition. All of the so-called savage races had been blotted out of existence by new and deadly diseases. The Caucasian race saved themselves after a death rate of fifty percent. Those who remained alive were almost degenerates in many ways. The extensive use of the automobile came near withering the legs of the *genus Homo*. The only perfect form of man or woman was of marble in the art galleries. The hospitals for the insane and feeble-minded and epileptic were crowded to their utmost capacity. As a final resort Congress passed a National Sterilization Act, affecting those who should be found unfit to have children.

"For a while it worked and then it was discovered that so many people were being sterilized because they were unfit to be parents, that the human race was rapidly shrinking in number. Sterilization solved so many of the problems of modern life that it

became too popular—almost a fashionable fad. When a man and woman entered into a companionate marriage they thought they would feel a lot happier if they knew they would never have babies. This condition of affairs existed in and around 2800. The people actually abused the law and took advantage of the National Sterilization Board. You see, before a person could receive a sterilization permit the Board had to be convinced that the applicant was mentally and physically incompetent to have children; and many bright, intelligent men and women would go before the Board and take the examination and pretend to be feeble-minded just so they could receive the permit. Those were the very people who should have had the babies; yet they were the ones who did not want them. Having a baby in those dark ages was almost as bad as death itself.

"The human race at that time was not only degenerating as individuals but disappearing as a species. It was at that time that our scientists began to talk about synthetic babies. A lot of research and experiments were done on the lower forms of life. It was found that a piece of heart muscle from a chicken embryo could be kept alive indefinitely and go on growing in an incubator. Later the surgeons were able to keep entire organs like the liver and spleen alive, and trans-

plant them into the site of similar diseased organs. It was determined that the eggs of the sea urchin would grow into mature adults without the aid of the male; all that was necessary was to put them in water containing certain salts at a certain temperature.

"These experiments finally ended in the discovery that the human ovary could be kept alive and functioning under certain conditions in a glass vessel. Such an ovary was able to develop and expel a perfect ovum every twenty-eight days. By a process similar to that used with the sea urchin, these ova could not only be kept alive but could be developed into fully matured babies. At a certain point in their growth they were taken out of the sterile glucose solution and respiration started with a pulmometer. As far as any tests were concerned, they were just like all the other babies.

"A great many of these synthetic babies were made and allowed to grow up under ideal conditions. It was soon discovered that they could be kept free from all the diseases of childhood, they could grow into vigorous adults and be compared very favorably with the best of the race—provided they came from the ovary of a woman who was perfectly normal. That caused a lot of thinking and the thinking ended in the rapid collection of material and the building of large num-

bers of special laboratories to grow these synthetic babies in.

"When all was ready, the Universal Sterilization Law was passed. All young people were required to spend a few minutes under a special form of radium ray when they reached a certain age and no one was allowed to enter into a companionate marriage until this had been done. The continued supply of material for future use was provided for by one of the sections of this act which stated that all young women were to take an examination and those who were nearly perfect in every way were required to submit to an Oophorectomy and were compensated for this by special pensions and privileges denied other women. In regard to this, I need not remind you that it was one of our reasons for fleeing from modern civilization. It was a danger that threatened you in all its horror.

"Anyway, the machinery was finally set into motion. The records show that the last child was born on the western continent on July 4th 3009. Since then the race has been kept alive by the production of synthetic babies. About one hundred and fifty thousand babies are produced every year. They are all perfect in every way because any who show defects are not allowed to develop. The Government keeps them in nurseries till they are called for. We saw how that happened in the case

of your sister and brother-in-law. After they were forty years old, they decided to apply for a permit to take a baby, and they asked for a four-year-old child.

"These babies, grown under ideal conditions, the offspring of tested ovaries, have in a thousand years saved our race from degeneration. In fact, everybody now is perfect in practically every way. There is little sickness and people finally die painlessly of old age. Of course we have not a very large population, but what we have is composed of very fine individuals."

At this point Elizabeth Sellers jumped to her feet as she exclaimed,

"And yet in spite of the perfectness no one is happy!"

"That is it exactly!" agreed the young man. "There has been no trouble in making a living, everybody is comfortably housed and clothed, there is no sickness, food is abundant, everybody is working at some interesting work—and yet no one is happy! We saw that years ago and we know now that it is true."

The young woman sat down again and snuggled close to the man.

"Tell me again why they are not happy. I have heard you tell it before but tell me again. I want to hear it out here in the wilderness where we are alone—together."

The man put his arm around her and drew her close to him as he replied, and his voice had the soft tenderness of a breeze in the spring time, as it scatters pollen.

"They are not happy because love has disappeared from the world. When children grow up now, they have only permit parents. They think they are falling in love when they enter into a companionate marriage. All they do is to share the same house during the hours they are not working. After they have accomplished all their ambitions require of them they try to satisfy their desires for a family by securing a baby permit and a child. The child can be of any age when it is taken into their home. It is a child from the ovary of a woman who may have been dead three hundred years. It is a child that never had a father. The man and woman pretend that it is their child but all the time they know that it is not and so does the child. The four-year-old baby your relatives are adopting this week can think and talk. Can it believe that this man and woman love it when they let it stay in a government nursery for four years without claiming it?

"There has been a surplus of women. These have been used as nurses. Your sister will do nothing for the child except supervise its care by three experienced women who know a thousand times

more about child culture than she does. The child will grow up to be intelligent, strong and beautiful, but it will grow up in an atmosphere devoid of love. A man and woman who are married, the way they are, in this period of civilization, do not know how to love a child because they never loved each other."

"But what is love, anyway?" asked the young woman.

"Love is sacrifice!" was the reply. "That seems to be the only definition. I have read the old books and when people in those old days were in love they always had to sacrifice themselves. A boy and a girl in love with each other waited for years till the time came when they could marry. They gave up their ambitions, their future, their success in life so they could marry. For years most of them felt, what was called in those days, 'the pinch of poverty.' There was sickness and constant work and struggle for the necessities of life. The love life centered around the house they lived in and they called this house a home. This is a word that disappeared from the English language years ago, centuries ago, when it was destroyed by the automobile, the aeroplane and moving picture, to say nothing of the companionate marriage.

"They lived in a house that they called a home and they had children. Every child they had made life harder for them. Knowing

nothing about it they had to learn to raise babies and care for them. The little things were often sick. The father worked all day and helped care for the children at night and the mothers never ceased to work. The children died and the men had to borrow money to bury them. That was before the time of universal Government cremation. Often the wives died and left the men with children, with little babies one day old; or the husbands died and left the wife to struggle on till the children grew old enough to help. Everything in that life meant sacrifice and out of that sacrifice grew the thing of old poets called love. It was so very different from what we call love today."

"You know so much about the old love," whispered the girl.

"That is because I have read of it. At its best it was a beautiful emotion and at its worst it was worth while. It made existence human. They lived like animals but they worshipped each other as though they were Gods. They were hungry and destitute and poor and sick and weary but when they faced the sunset of life together, they were happy—because they had sacrificed everything and as a result of this sacrifice they had found love. Their house was often poorly furnished and the place of much hardship but it was a home. Their babies were sick, cross and a constant care, but they were their own flesh

and blood. When a man wrote about love in those days you knew he was happy in spite of everything.

"It is hard for a young man like me to tell whether all that has happened is for the betterment of mankind. We are taught by the Educators, that at the present time we are in a Golden Age. The factors that made life hard for the human race twenty centuries ago have all been disposed of. We no longer have disease, hunger, poverty or crime. All we know about such hardships is obtained from our ancient histories. Every detail of our life is provided for so that we can obtain the maximum amount of satisfaction for a minimum amount of effort. Nothing has been neglected.

"Yet, you and I have fled from it all. Why? Simply because we wanted something that modern civilization refused to grant us. For some reason we became, even as children, atavistic. We wanted to live like the savages of twenty centuries ago. We wanted to toss aside every invention that had made life a luxuriant certainty and take our chance with the animals and the birds. Scorning a house with electrical appliances of all kinds, with radio, television, monoplanes, synthetic food, central heat and daily amusements of every kind furnished by the Central Board of Education and Amusement, we have determined to make out of this cave a home.

We know there is water down in the brook; there is such a thing as fire and all around us is wood in the shape of trees. Somewhere near us there must be food of the kind our ancestors ate, meat and vegetables. If that fails, we have enough synthetic food to last us a year, but just as soon as we can, we must change our diet. These books I brought with us tell how to cook with fire. We shall have to make some furniture and somehow make receptacles of some kind to cook in. Every day we will be doing a dozen things that no man or woman has done for a thousand, fifteen hundred years. No doubt we shall do them rather poorly and clumsily at first. Still we have brains and books to instruct us in these ancient arts and we shall at least be able to keep busy. We shall have to keep busy to prepare for the cold weather."

"It will be a lot of fun," said Elizabeth, though her tone did not indicate anything but the most serious mood. "It will be real sport to work out all these problems and learn to do all these new things that were so usual and commonplace centuries ago. It thrills me to know that I will soon be doing things that no woman has done for so many hundreds of years. Over eight hundred years ago it was found that synthetic meat could be made so easily that it did not pay to keep animals for food supply any long-

er, so they were all turned loose. Their ancestors were carefully housed and fed to give mankind meat, milk, shoes and clothes and now their descendants in large herds roam over the deserted farm lands. I am glad that we came. It is good to know that our vision has turned into a reality, I know that I shall never be sorry."

They talked on and on till the moon came up and finally they talked themselves to sleep out on the rock and did not realize what had happened to them till they awoke the next morning, rather stiff and sore from their cramped position and hard stone couch, but very happy in the fact that they had each other and that the cave was to become a home and that they felt an emotion which they knew was the old kind of love.

The Librarian of the Congressional Library received the report that certain books had been stolen from the shelves. He was also notified of the fact that the assistant watchman had disappeared. Going to the card index of individualities, he was not at all surprised to find that Elizabeth Sellers, No. 237,841, had disappeared at the same time. He took her card out of the files, also the card of the watchman, Leuson Hubler, No. 230,900. After that he spent some hours of careful thought going over the pages of

a small book in which he had kept some very personal records in pen and ink, something that at most only a dozen living men were able to do, for the art of penmanship had disappeared with the invention of the psychophone, an instrument that directly transferred and preserved the thoughts of a person, so that at any time in the future the small glass cylinder could be inserted into a radio and repeat the thought. This machine had completely supplanted the pen and the typewriter in the commercial, literary and educational life. Only a few of the savants were able to write, so the Librarian was more than safe in using that method to preserve his observations concerning No. 237,841 and No. 230,900.

After a week had passed he went out to call on Dr. Gowers and his wife. He was nearly thirty years older than they but had seen a great deal of them socially, and admired them very much, especially for their ability to follow a certain line of investigation to its ultimate ending. In fact, he often stated that when these two were finished with the study of any problem, there was nothing more to do on the subject.

He found a charming family group out on the well kept lawn. There were the Doctor and his wife and three matronly ladies who wore the uniform of trained nurses, and they were all paying the greatest attention to a little

girl who was playing with a rubber ball. Dr. Gowers welcomed him cordially.

"I am so glad you have come," he said. "I want you to see our little girl, Lilith. We have just taken her out on a permit and I am sure you will agree with me that she is far above the average for a four year old child. Having her with us has made the disappearance of Elizabeth easier to bear."

"Is Elizabeth gone?" asked the Librarian, in pretended surprise.

"She certainly has!" replied Dr. Helen Gowers. "She and a boy that was working in your library went up in the air a week ago for a ride over and they never came back."

"Is that so? Perhaps they had an accident."

"No, indeed. You know as well as I do that the last accident to a plane happened over five hundred years ago. No! They did not come back, for the reason that they wanted to stay away. Elizabeth took a lot of her clothes and jewels with her. They were married in Pittsburgh on forged permits."

"Why I never heard of such a thing!" exclaimed the Librarian.

"Neither has anyone else. Such a thing has not happened for over a thousand years. I had a hard time before I was even able to find out what such a thing was called. Its name was *Elopement*. It has been so easy for young people to enter into a companionate

marriage and everybody is so glad to help and encourage them to marry, that anything like this just never was thought possible."

"I confess that I cannot understand it," interrupted Dr. Gowers. "We have tried to be like parents to Elizabeth and I am sure that if she and Leuson had only come to us, we should have been glad to listen to them and help them apply for their preliminary treatment and marriage license. Of course, things might have been delayed for a few months by Elizabeth's operation, but her pension from that would have made it very easy for them to live the rest of their lives."

"Looks like the action of some lower animal," said the Librarian.

"That's just what makes us feel so bad," said the wife. "They just went off like two animals. I only hope that they will come to their senses and return for a pardon, which I am sure will be granted. Perhaps they will have a logical explanation for their conduct. Have you time to come into the house? I want you to listen to the daily programme I have arranged for these three nurses who are going to care for Lilith under my supervision. I have filled twelve psychophonic cylinders with my orders and I believe that it can serve as a perfect example of correct child culture. It may be good enough to use in the National Educational Department."

"Of course," added the proud

husband and father, "you understand that this is our first child and we have only had her for four days. Helen is so capable and enthusiastic and confident about her ability, that she feels she has already added to the knowledge of the world by preparing this programme."

"I am sure," said the Librarian suavely, "that she will make a perfect mother, and just as soon as I can, I will drop in for the evening and listen to the twelve records. Just now I shall have to fly back to the Library. I am very sorry about your sister. If you hear anything of her, be sure to let me know."

However, he did not go back to the Library; instead he went to see the Head of the Biological Maternity Units. The two men had been fast friends for many years. He spent several hours in conference, and when he finally returned to his office, he tingled with a strange enthusiasm such as he had not experienced for many years.

After that there was nothing for him to do but wait, which he did with a very definite impatience.

It was late autumn: to be exact, it was the last day of November. The Librarian, who lived amid his treasures, was listening to a psychophonic lecture on the latest evidence of life on the planet Venus: at least he was pretending to listen, but most of the time he

was asleep. He suddenly was aroused to find that there was a man seated in a chair near him. He looked at him a moment and then jumped to his feet.

"By the Seven Sacred Caterpillars! If it isn't Leuson Hubler! My dear boy, where did you come from and where have you been?"

The young man smiled as he replied.

"Did our disappearance cause much of a sensation?"

"Not much. The Gowers were so powerful that they kept it out of the daily-radio-news-transmission-service. Elizabeth's sister feels the disgrace keenly."

"I believe that. Well, we are safe and so far are having a wonderful time, but I just had to have some things that I could not make and I knew they were in your museum, so, considering you are to blame for it all, I made up my mind to come and ask you for them. I want an ax and a saw and a hatchet, several iron kettles, a frying pan, a rifle, some ammunition and—oh—a lot of things that we shall need to get through the winter on."

"I hardly know what you are talking about," said the Librarian, "but if you know what you want and can recognize them, I will give you everything. But where in the world are you living?"

"We are living in a cave."

"Like a pair of toads?"

"No! Like Gods! We are savages, Father, if you know what

that means. We went back to the age of the Troglodytes. You are to blame for it all. You had me taught how to read and gave me a position where all the old books were available. You even picked out love stories of the ancient times and urged me to study them. It was you who first introduced me to the novels of Henry Cecil, such as *The Adorable Fool*, *Wanders in Spain*, and *The Passionate Lover*. You urged me to dust and read *Prue and I* and *Reveries of a Bachelor*, and in the field of poetry you advised *Idyls of the King* and *Songs of a Spanish Lover*. I read those books when a boy and they made me different. And when I met Elizabeth Sellers, I met a girl who was willing to listen to something different and this is the result; so if it has been a sin and a crime to do what we have done, you are to blame."

The old Librarian smiled.

"Everything you say is true but it is only part of the truth. It has all been a wonderful experiment but the details had to be kept from both of you; otherwise you would not have been free agents; but before I tell you about it, let me assure you that I, at least, do not think that you have done anything wrong. Now this is what happened.

"About thirty-six years ago I had a daughter, and the same year my friend, the Head of the

Biological Maternity Units, also took a little baby from the Nurseries. The two girls were of the same age and almost grew up together, as we were living next door to each other. We thought it would be a fine thing to give them a liberal education and so, by the time they reached fifteen years of age, they knew a great deal and more than was good for them. They were beautiful women, and they had some beautiful and impracticable ideas. They were both in love with two nice young men who, unfortunately, were also more or less dreamers.

"At the time of the yearly examination of the young women to select material for additional ovamaters to supply synthetic babies, these two young women passed a wonderful examination and were ordered to the operating room. They would have been pensioned so liberally that they could have married and lived comfortably the rest of their lives. What really happened was that they both committed suicide the night before the operation. You may not be familiar with that word, so I will tell you that it means to kill oneself. We were all so shocked by it—it was so unusual, that we kept the matter quiet; but it made a deep impression on my friend and myself. We talked the tragedy over and hastily decided to make what amends we could. Secretly, my friend operated on their bodies before we sent them to the

National Crematory, and then he started to grow their children. It was my idea that he should continue with this work till he produced two children, a boy and a girl, and then destroy the two ovamaters. This was done, and as soon as I could do so, I applied for a baby and selected you. In order to avoid suspicion, we arranged to have the girl placed with the Sellers family. They had one daughter and wanted another. Unfortunately the parents died before the little girl was mature and part of her care was assumed by her sister, who was married to Dr. Gowers. But the sister was so busy with her experiments that she did not have much time to spend on the little one and she just ran wild, most of the time with you. The escapades of you two children nearly drove us all insane—for example, the time you broke the time record for a non-stop flight around the world, following the equator. Still, thanks to my early training, you wanted to be with books more than anything else, and Elizabeth was always willing to hear you talk and believed all you told her. You seemed rather slow, so I had Elizabeth put on the list for operation. That caused the explosion. My dear old friend, who is a sort of a grandfather to Elizabeth, is as pleased as can be about it all. He feels that it is a wonderful atonement to two dead women and a splendid and unique

experiment in biology. Without your knowing it, we gave you a chance to be happy. It is no wonder you say that you have been living like Gods."

"So you two planned it all?" asked the astonished young man.

"Just about. Of course we did not know how you two would work out the details. We knew that you would have to get beyond the reach of the Government to even start. If the authorities found out where you were and what you had done, you would probably be placed in solitary confinement for life, though that is a punishment that has not been necessary for a thousand years. In this case, however, they would feel that it was imperative. Suppose your conduct became known? What if the young people adopted it as the latest fad? You can readily see that the entire economy of the human race would be disrupted. Of course you can depend on two old men to keep your secret, but as far as the world is concerned, you had better consider yourself dead, for you must not come back."

"We do not want to come back, but I cannot see what harm it would do!"

"Just this, it would disrupt our present civilization. Suppose that Elizabeth has a child. The last birth occurred in 3009. But before that, for hundreds of thousands of years every child was born with a mother. The desire to give

birth to a child was as much a part of their lives as the desire to eat and sleep. For nearly a thousand years, all women have been sterile and have had to be content with synthetic babies, but do you suppose that the desire to have babies of their own has disappeared from their mind and soul? No, indeed! it is still there and it is a powerful desire even though it is dormant and subconscious. If Elizabeth should appear in Washington, carrying her baby, if it became known that she had actually given birth to the child and that she had a husband who was the child's father, the women would wreck the Government. The older women would become wild because they had been deprived of what would seem to them to be the greatest privilege and blessing of their sex, while the young girls would refuse to accept the dictates of our government and would try just as hard as they could, to follow Elizabeth's example. There would be chaos."

"They why did you secretly urge us to go on with it?"

"For two reasons. First as a retribution to your mothers, who decided to kill themselves rather than go through with the operation, and second, because, as scientists, we wanted to make sure it was still possible for a woman to have a child."

"Do you mean that you thought there was a doubt?"

"Certainly! And we had a right to think so. For at least forty generations these physiological functions of both sexes have been unused. We were unable to tell what would happen if a normal man married a normal woman. We did not even know if there were any normal people any more. We tried to find out what the physicians and biologists thought about it, but there again we were in trouble. No one had thought about such a thing for so long, that they could only guess, and, being scientists, they felt that each had to guess differently from the other."

The young man laughed.

"I think we shall be able to tell you the answer some time."

"That is the pity of it. You will be able to tell my friend and you can tell me, but you cannot tell the world. We should be pleased if you had a child, and we would try to arrange to secretly get you a child of the opposite sex so they could grow up together and marry at the right time. If we were only younger, we might even assist you in forming a small race, but it would have to be a race of savages, educated savages, but none the less composed of individuals who had to live under the same conditions that savages used to live under. Well, we have talked enough and I know that you are anxious to return to your wife. Let's go and get whatever you need from my private

museum. I want you to take anything you need. We do not want Elizabeth to suffer in any way. Tell her the story I have told you. Tell her that we love her and want her to be a brave girl. Just as soon as you go, I will step over and see her grandfather. Be sure to leave me a good map of just where you are. I wish there was some way of communicating with you, so we could be sent for—if you get into trouble of any kind. We will prepare a medicine chest for you."

An hour later the young man jumped into his plane, kissed the old man good-bye and started out for his long trip back to the cave. In the monoplane were a number of things that would help make the winter more endurable. As soon as he left, the Librarian started out to make a midnight call on his old friend and the two talked till morning; and the things they talked about were the things that had interested young folks thousands of years ago.

The winter was severe. With all his education and effort and even with the use of a lot of common sense, Leuson could not keep the winter from being a hard one. The chimney smoked, the food spoiled, the roof of the cave leaked, the wolves killed and ate their little pig, their few chickens refused to lay, the traps did not catch rabbits regularly, and never a day passed without some new

form of trouble, unforeseen and unpreventable. Yet Leuson Hubler was happy with his wife, Elizabeth Sellers, because they lived in a home and the thing that made the cave a home was love.

The winter passed and the spring came. The young man wanted to make another trip to Washington—to see if he could get help, advice or medicine. His wife refused to let him go; she felt that she would die if she had to spend a night alone. Together they studied over the old books and tried to prepare themselves as best they could for the event they now were certain had to be faced. Leuson captured and tamed a wild goat and in May she gave birth to a kid. He felt easier. No matter what happened, there would be milk. Elizabeth laughed at him and said she would tend to that part of the programme, but Leuson only took better care of the goat, and learned to milk it. He also ventured to send a radio message to the Librarian.

June was warm. Elizabeth rarely left the mouth of the cave. For over three weeks she had not been down on the meadow. Every day Leuson would take the goat and the kid down to the pasture. Finally he decided to keep the goat in the cave and bring it grass. He did not want to lose the goat. Elizabeth kept on laughing at him. He would laugh back at her and then go down the

path with sorrow in his face and fear in his heart.

On the last of June, Elizabeth stayed in her bed, Leuson stayed by her side. They talked and now and then he gave her milk, warm from the goat. He did for her all he could and she helped herself as well as she was able to remember the instructions in the old books, and all through the night she kept on telling him that she had been happy in her home and their love and that she was glad she was going to have the baby and how proud she was that he was the father of the baby and how much she loved him and how proud they were going to be of their child—and when morning came she died.

The cause of her death was a simple matter. The average physician of the nineteenth century could have saved her. The only reason for her death was that she had given birth to a baby and there was no one there who knew how to care for her in a scientific manner.

Leusen Hubler, the first Father that the world had known for a thousand years, picked his daughter up and carried her into the sunshine. There, on the rock ledge, the kid was nursing the goat. The goat was bleating from hunger and the joy of nursing. Lueson gave her a handful of grain and let the baby drink with the kid.

As he knelt there, giving his

daughter her first food, two old men toiled up the steep path. The Librarian and his friend were bringing the medicine that would have saved the life of the first Mother.

They were just a little too late.

That fall, in the city of Washington, the National Society of Federated Women held their annual meeting. Five thousand of the leaders of their sex had gathered for the meeting and every woman in the nation was listening to the proceedings over the radio. It was the one time in the year that the women felt fully their sex consciousness. All through the year they believed that they were the equal of the male sex, but during this week they knew they were superior in every way. The usual programme was presented, the usual leaders of the feminine sex introduced. It was not till Thursday afternoon that the unusual occurred.

A man was introduced to the great audience. It was a distinct novelty, as only rarely was a man invited to take part in the conference.

Leusen Hubler walked out on the platform, carrying a basket which he placed behind the President's chair. Then he started to talk in a voice so clear and musical that there was hardly any need of the loud speakers, and even as he talked to the five thousand leaders of womankind, many

more thousands of women in all parts of the land listened to his words over the radio.

He started to tell them about the old days. He talked in simple language, with well chosen words. Largely he repeated what he had said to his bride the first evening in front of the cave. He told about the gradual growth of unrest in the women and selfishness in the men and how with the companionate marriage had come a gradual deterioration of the human race. He went on to explain the gradual growth of the Sterilization laws and how finally the Synthetic Baby was thought not only necessary, but highly scientific. Next he told of the disappearance of the home and the gradual death of family love. With the home and love had disappeared the father. There remained only houses in which lived men and women who were "married" companions and nothing else. They had children, the seed of dead women, who had never known a husband's love. The children were loved only as permit children.

On and on he talked and as he talked there arose in the hearts of the women who listened a strange unrest and hunger for something that had once been their heritage. They listened and yearned for something they had lost a thousand years ago. Then he told them about Elizabeth and himself: how they were the children of two women who had killed

themselves rather than to be denied their righteous inheritance. He told how they had loved each other as boy and girl and as young man and woman had fled to the wilderness rather than submit to the laws of the land. He told how they had lived and loved in the cave, and how they had wondered whether it was still possible for a woman to give birth to a living child: how they had tried to prepare for the emergency—about the goat in case anything happened.

The five thousand women silently rose to their feet: they crowded around the platform where he was weaving his magic spell—and he told about that first night and then about the last night—how she had said that no matter what happened she was repaid by the love and happiness that had been hers that year in the cave home—and then he told how she had died, but that she might have been saved—and that even in her death she had shown to the world that a normal woman could still give birth to a normal child—and then—

He reached down into the basket and, picking up his daughter, held the baby high above the heads of the five thousand women and showed them a baby, born of the love of a man and a woman in a home.

For a while the hall was silent.

The women looked at the baby, and tears streamed down their

cheeks, they knew at last what they had been wanting all those thousand years. They knew, but they needed a leader to tell them.

And Dr. Helen Sellers Gowers, large, efficient, determined, shouldered her way to the platform and stood by the man and the baby and said:

"This is the child of the woman I called my sister. She is dead, but we will never forget what she has taught us. I know what I feel and I know what you feel. It is too late for many of us, but it is not too late to save

our boys and girls. There must be no more synthetic children, no more companionate husbands, no more mere houses. We can rule the country because we are the stronger. Let us go to Congress and tell the men what they must grant us."

And as they marched down Pennsylvania Avenue, the women of the nation cried in unison:

"Give us back our homes, our husbands and our babies!"

The End

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LITTLE GIRL LOST

By Richard Matheson

A nice domestic arrangement. One which—sooner or later—most "enlightened" husbands grow amenable to after that first child arrives. But if number one just happens to be a girl named Tina and if your own name also just happens to be Chris, then we hope that—unlike the hapless protagonist in the following nightmare for parents of all ages—you won't have to learn, the hard way, that sometimes parallel lines can make a difference between a good or a bad night's sleep!

TINA's crying woke me up in a second. It was pitch black, middle of the night. I heard Ruth stir beside me in bed. In the front room Tina caught her breath, then started in again, louder.

"Oh, gawd," I muttered groggily.

Ruth grunted and started to push back the covers.

"I'll get it," I said wearily and she slumped back on the pillow. We take turns when Tina has her nights; has a cold or a stomach-ache or just takes a flop out of bed.

I lifted up my legs and dropped them over the edge of the blankets. Then I squirmed myself down to the foot of the bed and

slung my legs over the edge. I winced as my feet touched the icy floor boards. The apartment was arctic, it usually is these winter nights, even in California.

I padded across the cold floor threading my way between the chest, the bureau, the bookcase in the hall and then the edge of the tv set as I moved into the living-room. Tina sleeps there because we could only get a one bedroom apartment. She sleeps on a couch that breaks down into a bed. And, at that moment, her crying was getting louder and she started calling for her mommy.

"All right, Tina. Daddy'll fix it all up," I told her.

She kept crying. Outside, on the balcony, I heard our collie Mack jump down from his bed on the camp chair.

I bent over the couch in the darkness. I could feel that the covers were lying flat. I backed away, squinting at the floor but I didn't see any Tina moving around.

"Oh, my God," I chuckled to myself, in spite of irritation, "the poor kid's under the couch."

I got down on my knees and looked, still chuckling at the thought of little Tina falling out of bed and crawling under the couch.

"Tina, where are you?" I said, trying not to laugh.

Her crying got louder but I couldn't see her under the couch.

It was too dark to see clearly.

"Hey, where are you, kiddo?" I asked. "Come to papa."

Like a man looking for a collar button under the bureau I felt under the couch for my daughter, who was still crying and begging for mommy, mommy.

Came the first twist of surprise. I couldn't reach her no matter how hard I stretched.

"Come *on*, Tina," I said, amused no longer, "stop playing games with your old man."

She cried louder. My outstretched hand jumped back as it touched the cold wall.

"Daddy!" Tina cried.

"Oh for . . . !"

I stumbled up and jolted irritably across the rug. I turned on the lamp beside the record player and turned to get her, and was stopped dead in my tracks, held there, a half-asleep mute, gaping at the couch, ice water plaiting down my back.

Then, in a leap, I was on my knees by the couch and my eyes were searching frantically, my throat getting tighter and tighter. I heard her crying under the couch, but I couldn't see her.

My stomach muscles jerked in as the truth of it struck me. I ran my hands around wildly under the bed but they didn't touch a thing. I heard her crying and by God, she wasn't there!

"Ruth!" I yelled, "Come here."

I heard Ruth catch her breath in the bedroom and then there was a rustle of bedclothes and the sound of her feet rushing across the bedroom floor. Out of the side of my eyes I saw the light blue movement of her nightgown.

"What is it?" she gasped.

I backed to my feet, hardly able to breathe much less speak. I started to say something but the words choked up in my throat. My mouth hung open. All I could do was point a shaking finger at the couch.

"Where is she!" Ruth cried.

"I don't know!" I finally managed. "She . . ."

"What!"

Ruth dropped to her knees beside the couch and looked under.

"Tina!" she called.

"Mommy."

Ruth recoiled from the couch, color draining from her face. The eyes she turned to me were horrified. I suddenly heard the sound of Mack scratching wildly at the door.

"Where *is* she?" Ruth asked again, her voice hollow.

"I don't know," I said, feeling numb. I turned on the light and . . .

"But she's *crying*," Ruth said as if she felt the same distrust of sight that I did. "I . . . Chris, *listen*."

The sound of our daughter crying and sobbing in fright.

"Tina!" I called loudly, point-

lessly, "where *are* you, angel?"

She just cried. "Mommy!" she said, "Mommy, pick me up!"

"No, no, this is crazy," Ruth said, her voice tautly held as she rose to her feet, "she's in the kitchen."

"But . . ."

I stood there dumbly as Ruth turned on the kitchen light and went in. The sound of her agonized voice made me shudder.

"Chris! She's not in here."

She came running in, her eyes stark with fear. She bit her teeth into her lip.

"But, where *is* . . . ?" she started to say, then stopped.

Because we both heard Tina crying and the sound of it was coming from under the couch.

But there wasn't anything under the couch.

Still Ruth couldn't accept the crazy truth. She jerked open the hall closet and looked in it. She looked behind the tv set, even behind the record player, a space of maybe two inches.

"Honey, *help* me," she begged, "we can't just leave her this way."

I didn't move.

"Honey, she's under the couch," I said.

"But she's not!"

Once more, like the crazy, impossible dream it was, me on my knees on the cold floor, feeling under the couch. I got *under* the couch, I touched every inch of

floor space there. But I couldn't touch her, even though I heard her crying — *right in my ear*.

I got up, shivering from the cold and something else. Ruth stood in the middle of the living-room rug staring at me. Her voice was weak, almost inaudible.

"Chris," she said, "Chris, what is it?"

I shook my head. "Honey, I don't know," I said, "I don't know *what* it is."

Outside, Mack began to whine as he scratched. Ruth glanced at the balcony door, her face a white twist of fear. She was shivering now in her silk gown as she looked back at the couch. I stood there absolutely helpless, my mind racing a dozen different ways, none of them toward a solution, not even toward concrete thought.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, on the verge of a scream I knew was coming.

"Baby, I . . ."

I stopped short and suddenly we were both moving for the couch.

Tina's crying was fainter.

"Oh, no," Ruth whimpered, "No. *Tina*."

"Mommy," said Tina, further away. I could feel the chills lacing over my flesh.

"Tina, come back here!" I heard myself shouting, the father yelling at his disobedient child, who can't be seen.

"TINA!" Ruth screamed.

Then the apartment was dead silent and Ruth and I were kneeling by the couch looking at the emptiness underneath. Listening.

To the sound of our child, peacefully snoring.

"Bill, can you come right over?" I said frantically.

"What?" Bill's voice was thick and fuzzy.

"Bill, this is Chris. Tina has disappeared!"

He woke up.

"She's been kidnaped?" he asked.

"No," I said, "she's here but . . . she's not here."

He made a confused sound. I grabbed in a breath.

"Bill, for God's sake get over here!"

A pause.

"I'll be right over," he said. I knew from the way he said it he didn't know why he was coming.

I dropped the receiver and went over to where Ruth was sitting on the couch shivering and clasping her hands tightly in her lap.

"Hon, get your robe," I said. "You'll catch cold."

"Chris, I . . ." Tears running down her cheeks. "Chris, where is she?"

"Honey."

It was all I could say, hopelessly, weakly. I went into the bedroom and got her robe. On the way back I stooped over and

twisted hard on the wall heater.

"There," I said, putting the robe over her back, "put it on."

She put her arms through the sleeves of the robe, her eyes pleading with me to do something. Knowing very well I couldn't do it, she was asking me to bring her baby back.

I got on my knees again, just to be doing something. I knew it wouldn't help any. I remained there a long time just staring at the floor under the couch. Completely in the dark.

"Chris, she's sleeping on the floor," Ruth said, her words faltering from colorless lips. "Won't . . . she catch cold?"

"I . . ."

That was all I could say. What could I tell her? No, she's not on the floor? How did I know? I could hear Tina breathing and snoring gently on the floor but she wasn't there to touch. She was gone but she wasn't gone. My brain twisted back and forth on itself trying to figure out that one. Try adjusting to something like that sometime. It's a fast way to breakdown.

"Honey, she's . . . she's not here," I said, "I mean . . . not on the floor."

"But . . ."

"I know, I know . . ." I raised my hands and shrugged in defeat. "I don't think she's cold, honey," I said as gently and persuasively as I could.

She started to say something too but then she stopped. There was nothing to say. It defied words.

We sat in the quiet room waiting for Bill to come. I'd called him because he's an engineering man, CalTech, top man with Lockheed over in the valley. I don't know why I thought that would help but I called him. I'd have called anyone just to have another mind to help. Parents are useless beings when they're afraid for their children.

Once, before Bill came, Ruth slipped to her knees by the couch and started slapping her hands over the floor.

"Tina, wake up!" she cried in newborn terror, "wake up!"

"Honey, what good is that going to do?" I asked.

She looked up at me blankly and knew. It wasn't going to do any good.

I heard Bill on the steps and reached the door before he did. He came in quietly, looking around and giving Ruth a brief smile. I took his coat. He was still in pajamas.

"What is it, kid?" he asked hurriedly.

I told him as briefly and as clearly as I could. He got down on his knees and checked for himself. He felt around underneath the couch and I saw his brow knot into lines when he heard Tina's

calm and peaceful breathing.

He straightened up.

"Well?" I asked.

He shook his head. "My God," he muttered.

We both stared at him. Outside Mack was still scratching and whining at the door.

"Where is she?" Ruth asked again, "Bill, I'm about to lose my mind."

"Take it easy," he said. I moved beside her and put my arm around her. She was trembling.

"You can hear her breathing," Bill said. "It's normal breathing. She must be all right."

"But where is she?" I asked, "you can't see her, you can't even touch her."

"I don't know," Bill said and was on his knees by the bed again.

"Chris, you'd better let Mack in," Ruth said, worried about that for a moment, "he'll wake all the neighbors."

"All right, I will," I said and kept watching Bill.

"Should we call the police?" I asked. "Do you . . . ?"

"No, no, that wouldn't do any good," Bill said, "this isn't . . ." He shook his head as if he were shaking away everything he'd ever accepted. "It's not a police job," he said.

"Chris, he'll wake up all the . . ."

I turned for the door to let Mack in.

"Wait a minute," Bill said and

I was turned back, my heart pounding again.

Bill was half under the couch, listening hard.

"Bill, what is . . . ?" I started.
"Shhh!"

We were both quiet. Bill stayed there a moment longer. Then he straightened up and his face was blank.

"I can't hear her," he said.

"Oh, no!"

Ruth fell forward before the couch.

"Tina! Oh God, where is she!"

Bill was up on his feet, moving quickly around the room. I watched him, then looked back at Ruth slumped over the couch, sick with fear.

"Listen," Bill said, "do you hear anything?"

Ruth looked up. "Hear . . . anything?"

"Move around, move around," Bill said. "See what you hear."

Like robots Ruth and I moved around the living room having no idea what we were doing. Everything was quiet except for the incessant whining and scratching of Mack. I gritted my teeth and muttered a terse — "Shut up!" — as I passed the balcony door. For a second the vague idea crossed my mind that Mack knew about Tina. He'd always worshiped her.

Then there was Bill standing in the corner where the closet was, stretching up on his toes and lis-

tening. He noticed us watching him and gestured quickly for us to come over. We moved hurriedly across the rug and stood beside him.

"Listen," he whispered. We did.

At first there was nothing. Then Ruth gasped and none of us were letting out the noise of breath.

Up in the corner, where the ceiling met the walls, we could hear the sound of Tina sleeping.

Ruth stared up there, her face white, totally lost.

"Bill, what the . . ." I gave up.

Bill just shook his head slowly. Then suddenly he held up his hand and we all froze, jolted again.

The sound was gone.

Ruth started to sob helplessly. "Tina."

She started out of the corner.

"We have to find her," she said despairingly. "Please."

We ran around the room in unorganized circles, trying to hear Tina. Ruth's tear-streaked face was twisted into a mask of fright.

I was the one who found her this time.

Under the television set.

We all knelt there and listened. As we did we heard her murmur a little to herself and the sound of her stirring in sleep.

"Want my dolly," she muttered.

"*Tina!*"

I held Ruth's shaking body in my arms and tried to stop her sobbing. Without success. I couldn't keep my own throat from tightening, my heart from pounding slow and hard in my chest. My hands shook on her back, slick with sweat.

"For God's sake, *what is it?*" Ruth said but she wasn't asking us.

Bill helped me take her to a chair by the record player. Then he stood restlessly on the rug, gnawing furiously on one knuckle, the way I'd seen him do so often when he was engrossed in a problem.

He looked up, started to say something then gave it up and turned for the door.

"I'll let the pooch in," he said. "He's making a hell of a racket."

"Don't you have any idea what might have happened to her?" I asked.

"Bill . . . ?" Ruth begged.

Bill said, "I think she's in another dimension," and he opened the door.

What happened next came so fast we couldn't do a thing to stop it.

Mack came bounding in with a yelp and headed straight for the couch.

"He *knows!*" Bill yelled and dived for the dog.

Then happened the crazy part.

One second Mack was sliding under the couch in a flurry of ears, paws and tail. Then he was gone — *just like that*. Blotted up. The three of us gaped.

Then I heard Bill say, "Yes. Yes."

"Yes, *what?*" I didn't know where *I* was by then.

"The kid's in another dimension."

"What are you talking about?" I said in worried, near-angry tones. You don't hear talk like that everyday.

"Sit down," he said.

"Sit down? Isn't there anything we can *do*?"

Bill looked hurriedly at Ruth. She seemed to know what he was going to say.

"I don't know if there is," was what he said.

I slumped back on the couch.

"Bill," I said. Just speaking his name.

He gestured helplessly.

"Kid," he said, "this has caught me as wide open as you. I don't even know if I'm right or not but I can't think of anything else. I think that in some way, she's gotten herself into another dimension, probably the fourth. Mack, sensing it, followed her there. But how did they get there? — I don't know. I was under that couch, so were you. Did *you* see anything?"

I looked at him and he knew the answer.

"Another . . . dimension?" Ruth said in a tight voice. The voice of a mother who has just been told her child is lost forever.

Bill started pacing, punching his right fist into his palm.

"Damn, damn," he muttered. "How do things like this happen?"

Then while we sat there numbly, half listening to him, half for the sound of our child, he spoke. Not to us really. To himself, to try and place the problem in the proper perspective.

"One dimensional space a line," he threw out the words quickly. "Two dimensional space an infinite number of lines — an infinite number of one dimensional spaces. Three dimensional space an infinite number of planes — an infinite number of two dimensional spaces. Now the basic factor . . . the *basic factor* . . ."

He slammed his palm and looked up at the ceiling. Then he started again, more slowly now.

"Every point in each dimension a *section* of a line in the next higher dimension. All points in *line-sections* of the perpendicular lines that make the line a plane. All points in plane are sections of perpendicular lines that make the plane a solid."

"That means that in the third dimension . . ."

"Bill, for God's sake!" Ruth burst out. "Can't we *do* some-

thing? My *baby* is in . . . in *there*."

Bill lost his train of thought. He shook his head.

"Ruth, I don't . . ."

I got up then and was down on the floor again, climbing under the couch. I *had* to find it! I felt, I searched, I listened until the silence rang. Nothing.

Then I jerked up suddenly and hit my head as Mack barked loudly in my ear.

Bill rushed over and slid in beside me, his breath labored and quick.

"God's sake," he muttered, almost furiously. "Of all the damn places in the world . . ."

"If the . . . the *entrance* is here," I muttered, "why did we hear her voice and breathing all over the room?"

"Well, if she moved beyond the effect of the third dimension and was entirely in the fourth — then her movement, for *us* would seem to spread over all space. Actually she'd be in one spot in the fourth dimension but to us . . ."

He stopped.

Mack was whining. But more importantly Tina started in again. Right by our ears.

"He brought her back!" Bill said excitedly. "Man, what a mutt!"

He started twisting around, looking, touching, slapping at empty air.

"We've got to find it!" he said.

"We've got to reach in and pull them out. God knows how long this dimension pocket will last."

"What?" I heard Ruth gasp, then suddenly cry, "Tina, where are you? This is mommy."

I was about to say something about it being no use but then Tina answered.

"Mommy, mommy! Where are you, mommy?"

Then the sound of Mack growling and Tina crying angrily.

"She's trying to run around and find Ruth," Bill said. "But Mack won't let her. I don't know *how* but he seems to know where the joining place is."

"Where *are* they for God's sake!" I said in a nervous fury.

And backed right into the damn thing.

To my dying day I'll never really be able to describe what it was like. But here goes.

It was black, yes — to *me*. And yet there seemed to be a million lights. But as soon as I looked at one it disappeared and was gone. I saw them out of the sides of my eyes.

"Tina," I said, "where are you? Answer me! Please!"

And heard my voice echoing a million times, the words echoing endlessly, never ceasing but moving off as if they were alive and traveling. And when I moved my hand the motion made a whistling sound that echoed and re-echoed

and moved away like a swarm of insects flowing into the night.

"Tina!"

The sound of the echoing hurt my ears.

"Chris, can you hear her?" I heard a voice. But was it a voice — or more like a thought?

Then something wet touched my hand and I jumped.

Mack.

I reached around furiously for them, every motion making whistling echoes in vibrating blackness until I felt as if I were surrounded by a multitude of birds flocking and beating insane wings around my head. The pressure pounded and heaved in my brain.

Then I felt Tina. I say I felt her but I think if she wasn't my daughter and if I didn't know

somehow it was her, I would have thought I'd touched something else. Not a shape in the sense of third dimension shape. Let it go at that, I don't want to go into it.

"Tina," I whispered. "Tina, baby."

"Daddy, I'm scared of dark," she said in a thin voice and Mack whined.

Then I was scared of dark too, because a thought seared my mind.

How did I get us all out?

Then the other thought came — Chris, have you got them?

"I've got them!" I called.

And Bill grabbed my legs (which, I later learned, were still sticking out in the third dimension) and jerked me back to re-



ality with an armful of daughter and dog and memories of something I'd prefer having no memories about.

We all came piling out under the couch and I hit my head on it and almost knocked myself out. Then I was being alternately hugged by Ruth, kissed by the dog and helped to my feet by Bill. Mack was leaping on all of us, yelping and drooling.

When I was in talking shape again I noticed that Bill had blocked off the bottom of the couch with two card tables.

"Just to be safe," he said.

I nodded weakly. Ruth came in from the bedroom.

"Where's Tina?" I asked automatically, uneasy left-overs of memory still cooking in my brain.

"She's in our bed," she said. "I don't think we'll mind for one night."

I shook my head.

"I don't think so," I said.

Then I turned to Bill.

"Look," I said. "What the hell happened?"

"Well," he said, with a wry grin, "I told you. The third dimension is just a step below the fourth. In particular, every point in our space is a section of a perpendicular line in the fourth dimension."

"So?" I said.

"So, although the lines forming the fourth dimension would

be perpendicular to every point in the third dimension, they wouldn't be parallel — to us. But if enough of them in one area happened to be parallel in *both* dimensions — it might form a connecting corridor."

"You mean . . . ?"

"That's the crazy part," he said. "Of all the places in the world — under the couch — there's an area of points that are sections of parallel lines — parallel in both dimensions. They make a corridor into the next space."

"Or a hole," I said.

Bill looked disgusted.

"Hell of a lot of good my reasoning did," he said. "It took a dog to get her out."

I groaned softly.

"You can have it," I said.

"Who wants it?" he answered.

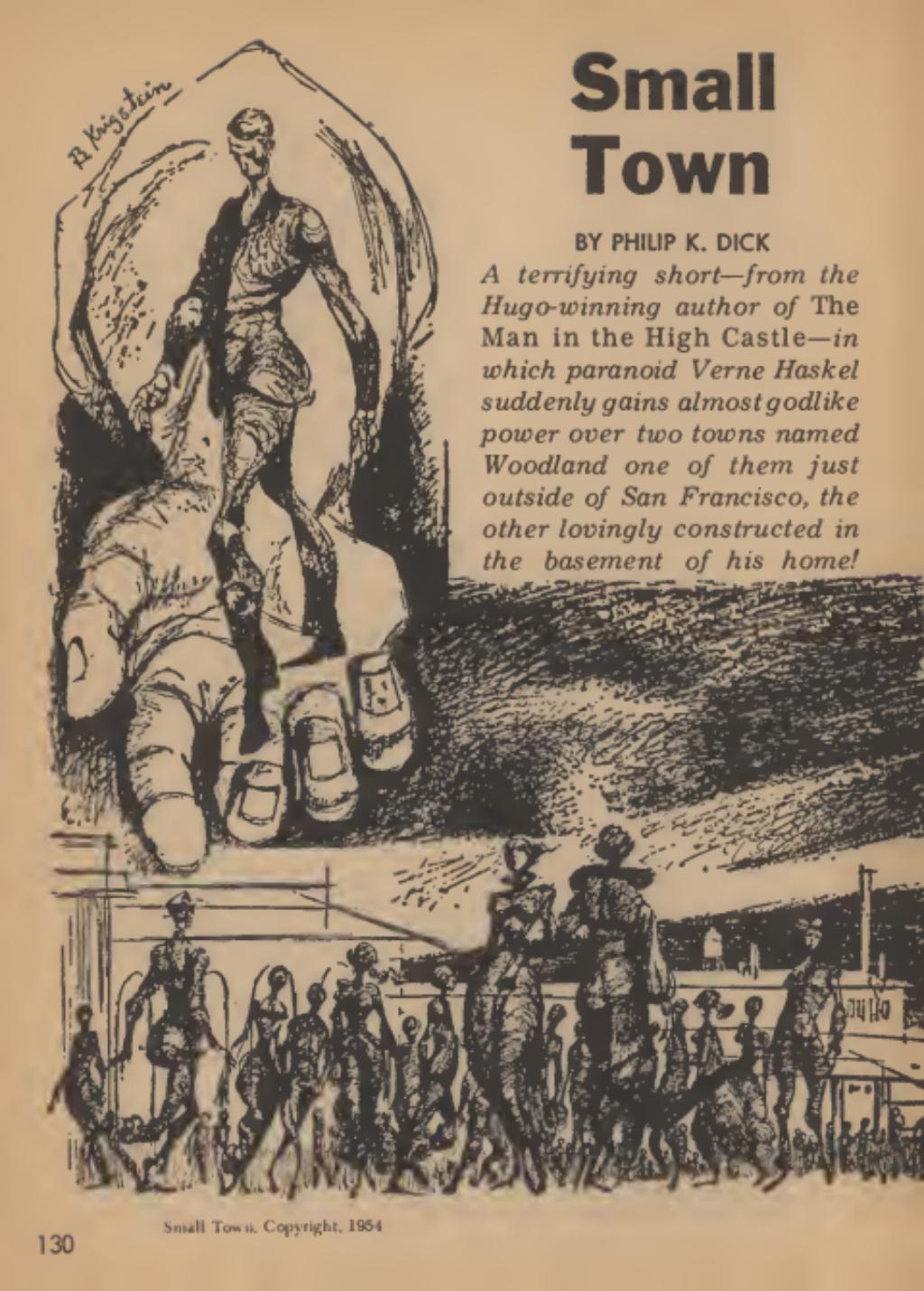
"What about the sound?"

"You're asking me?" he said.

That's about it. Oh, naturally, Bill told his friends at CalTech, and the apartment was overrun with research physicists for a month. But they didn't find anything. They said the thing was gone. Some said worse things.

But, just the same, when we got back from my mother's house where we stayed during the scientific seige — we moved the couch across the room and stuck the television where the couch was.

So some night we may look up and hear Arthur Godfrey chuckling from another dimension.



Small Town

BY PHILIP K. DICK

A terrifying short—from the Hugo-winning author of The Man in the High Castle—in which paranoid Verne Haskel suddenly gains almost godlike power over two towns named Woodland one of them just outside of San Francisco, the other lovingly constructed in the basement of his home!

VERNE HASKEL crept miserably up the front steps of his house, his over-coat dragging behind him. He was tired. Tired and discouraged. And his feet ached.

"My God," Madge exclaimed, as he closed the door and peeled off his coat and hat. "You home already?"

Haskel dumped his brief-case and began untying his shoes. His body sagged. His face was drawn and gray.

"Say something!"

"Dinner ready?"

"No, dinner isn't ready. What's wrong this time? An-

other fight with Larson?"

Haskel stumped into the kitchen and filled a glass with warm water and soda. "Let's move," he said.

"Move?"

"Away from Woodland. To San Francisco. Anywhere." Haskel drank his soda, his middle-aged flabby body supported by the gleaming sink. "I feel lousy. Maybe I ought to see Doc Barnes again. I wish this was Friday and tomorrow was Saturday."

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing. I don't know."



Haskel shook his head wearily. "Anything." He sank down at the kitchen table. "All I want is rest. Open a can of stew. Pork and beans. Anything."

"I suggest we go out to Don's Steakhouse. On Monday they have good sirloin."

"No. I've seen enough human faces today."

"I suppose you're too tired to drive me over to Helen Grant's."

"The car's in the garage. Busted again."

"If you took better care of it—"

"What the hell you want me to do? Carry it around in a cellophane bag?"

"Don't shout at me, Verne Haskel!" Madge flushed with anger. "Maybe you want to fix your own dinner."

Haskel got wearily to his feet. He shuffled toward the cellar door. "I'll see you."

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs in the basement."

"Oh, Lord!" Madge cried wildly. "Those trains! Those toys! How can a grown man, a middle-aged man—"

Haskel said nothing. He was already half way down the stairs, feeling around for the basement light.

The basement was cool and

moist. Haskel took his engineer's cap from the hook and fitted it on his head. Excitement and a faint surge of renewed energy filled his tired body. He approached the great plywood table with eager steps.

Tracks ran everywhere. Along the floor, under the coal bin, among the steam pipes of the furnace. The tracks converged at the table, rising up on carefully graded ramps. The table itself was littered with transformers and signals and switches and heaps of equipment and wiring. And—

And the town.

The detailed, painfully accurate model of Woodland. Every tree and house, every store and building and street and fireplug. A minute town, each facet in perfect order. Constructed with elaborate care throughout the years. As long as he could remember. Since he was a kid, building and glueing and working after school.

Haskel turned on the main transformer. All along the track signal lights glowed. He fed power to the heavy Lionel engine parked with its load of freight cars. The engine sped smoothly into life, gliding along the track. A flashing dark projectile of metal that

made his breath catch in his throat. He opened an electric switch and the engine headed down the ramp, through a tunnel and off the table. It raced under the work bench.

His trains. And his town. Haskel bent over the miniature houses and streets, his heart glowing with pride. He had built it—himself. Every inch. Every perfect inch. The whole town. He touched the corner of Fred's Grocery Store. Not a detail lacking. Even the windows. The displays of food. The signs. The counters.

The Uptown Hotel. He ran his hand over its flat roof. The sofas and chairs in the lobby. He could see them through the window.

Green's Drugstore. Bunion pad displays. Magazines. Frazier's Auto Parts. Mexico City Dining. Sharpstein's Apparel. Bob's Liquor Store. Ace Billiard Parlor.

The whole town. He ran his hands over it. He had built it: the town was his.

The train came rushing back, out from under the workbench. Its wheels passed over an automatic switch and a drawbridge lowered itself obediently. The train swept over and beyond, dragging its cars behind it.

Haskel turned up the power. The train gained speed. Its whistle sounded. It turned a sharp curve and grated across a cross-track. More speed. Haskel's hands jerked convulsively at the transformer. The train leaped and shot ahead. It swayed and bucked as it shot around a curve. The transformer was turned up to maximum. The train was a clattering blur of speed, rushing along the track, across bridges and switches, behind the big pipes of the floor furnace.

It disappeared into the coal bin. A moment later it swept out the other side, rocking wildly.

Haskel slowed the train down. He was breathing hard, his chest rising painfully. He sat down on the stool by the workbench and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers.

The train, the model town, gave him a strange feeling. It was hard to explain. He had always loved trains, model engines and signals and buildings. Since he was a little kid, maybe six or seven. His father had given him his first train. An engine and a few pieces of track. An old wind-up train. When he was nine he got his first real electric train. And two switches.

He added to it, year after

year. Track, engines, switches, cars, signals. More powerful transformers. And the beginnings of the town.

He had built the town up carefully. Piece by piece. First, when he was in junior high, a model of the Southern Pacific Depot. Then the taxi stand next door. The cafe where the drivers ate. Broad Street.

And so on. More and more. Houses, buildings, stores. A whole town, growing under his hands, as the years went by. Every afternoon he came home from school and worked. Glued and cut and painted and sawed.

Now it was virtually complete. Almost done. He was forty-three years old and the town was almost done.

Haskel moved around the big plywood table, his hands extended reverently. He touched a miniature store here and there. The flower shop. The theater. The Telephone Company. Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

That, too. Where he worked. His place of business. A perfect miniature of the plant, down to the last detail.

Haskel scowled. Jim Larson. For twenty years he had worked there, slaved day after day. For what? To see others advanced over him. Younger

men. Favorites of the boss. Yes-men with bright ties and pressed pants and wide, stupid grins.

Misery and hatred welled up in Haskel. All his life Woodland had got the better of him. He had never been happy. The town had always been against him. Miss Murphy in high school. The frats in college. Clerks in the snooty department stores. His neighbors. Cops and mailmen and bus drivers and delivery boys. Even his wife. Even Madge.

He had never meshed with the town. The rich, expensive little suburb of San Francisco, down the peninsula beyond the fog belt. Woodland was too damn upper-middle class. Too many big houses and lawns and chrome cars and deck chairs. Too stuffy and sleek. As long as he could remember. In school. His job—

Larson. The Pump and Valve Works. Twenty years of hard work.

Haskel's fingers closed over the tiny building, the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Savagely, he ripped it loose and threw it to the floor. He crushed it underfoot, grinding the bits of glass and metal and cardboard into a shapeless mass.

God, he was shaking all over. He stared down at the remains, his heart pounding wildly. Strange emotions, crazy emotions, twisted through him. Thoughts he never had had before. For a long time he gazed down at the crumpled wad by his shoe. What had once been the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

Abruptly he pulled away. In a trance he returned to his workbench and sat stiffly down on the stool. He pulled his tools and materials together, clicking the power drill on.

It took only a few moments. Working rapidly, with quick, expert fingers, Haskel assembled a new model. He painted, glued, fitted pieces together. He lettered a microscopic sign and sprayed a green lawn into place.

Then he carried the new model carefully over to the table and glued it in the correct spot. The place where Larson's Pump and Valve Works had been. The new building gleamed in the overhead light, still moist and shiny.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Haskel rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of satisfaction. The

Valve Works was gone. He had destroyed it. Obliterated it. Removed it from the town. Below him was Woodland—without the Valve Works. A mortuary instead.

His eyes gleamed. His lips twitched. His surging emotions swelled. He had got rid of it. In a brief flurry of action. In a second. The whole thing was simple—amazingly easy.

Odd he hadn't thought of it before.

Sipping a tall glass of ice-cold beer thoughtfully, Madge Haskel said, "There's something wrong with Verne. I noticed it especially last night. When he came home from work."

Doctor Paul Tyler grunted absently. "A highly neurotic type. Sense of inferiority. Withdrawal and introversion."

"But he's getting worse. Him and his trains. Those damn model trains. My God, Paul! Do you know he has a whole town down there in the basement?"

Tyler was curious. "Really? I never knew that."

"All the time I've known him he's had them down there. Started when he was a kid. Imagine a grown man playing with trains! It's—it's disgust-

ing. Every night the same thing."

"Interesting." Tyler rubbed his jaw. "He keeps at them continually? An unvarying pattern?"

"Every night. Last night he didn't even eat dinner. He just came home and went directly down."

Paul Tyler's polished features twisted into a frown. Across from him Madge sat languidly sipping her beer. It was two in the afternoon. The day was warm and bright. The living room was attractive in a lazy, quiet way. Abruptly Tyler got to his feet. "Let's take a look at them. The models. I didn't know it had gone so far."

"Do you really want to?" Madge slid back the sleeve of her green silk lounge pajamas and consulted her wristwatch. "He won't be home until five." She jumped to her feet, setting down her glass. "All right. We have time."

"Fine. Let's go down." Tyler caught hold of Madge's arm and they hurried down into the basement, a strange excitement flooding through them. Madge clicked on the basement light and they approached the big plywood table, giggling and nervous, like mischievous children.

"See?" Madge said, squeez-

ing Tyler's arm. "Look at it. Took years. All his life."

Tyler nodded slowly. "Must have." There was awe in his voice. "I've never seen anything like it. The detail. . . . He has skill."

"Yes, Verne is good with his hands." Madge indicated the workbench. "He buys tools all the time."

Tyler walked slowly around the big table, bending over and peering. "Amazing. Every building. The whole town is here. Look! There's my place."

He indicated his luxurious apartment building, a few blocks from the Haskel residence.

"I guess it's all there," Madge said. "Imagine a grown man coming down here and playing with model trains!"

"Power." Tyler pushed an engine along a track. "That's why it appeals to boys. Trains are big things. Huge and noisy. Power-sex symbols. The boy sees the train rushing along the track. It's so huge and ruthless it scares him. Then he gets a toy train. A model, like these. He controls it. Makes it start, stop. Go slow. Fast. He runs it. It responds to him."

Madge shivered. "Let's go

upstairs where it's warm. It's so cold down here."

"But as the boy grows up, he gets bigger and stronger. He can shed the model-symbol. Master the real object, the real train. Get genuine control over things. Valid mastery." Tyler shook his head. "Not this substitute thing. Unusual, a grown person going to such lengths." He frowned. "I never noticed a mortuary on State Street."

"A mortuary?"

"And this. Steuben Pet Shop. Next door to the radio repair shop. There's no pet shop there." Tyler cudgeled his brain. "What is there? Next to the radio repair place."

"Paris Furs." Madge clasped her arms. "Brrrrr. Come on, Paul. Let's go upstairs before I freeze."

Tyler laughed. "Okay, sis-sy." He headed toward the stairs, frowning again. "I wonder why. Steuben Pets. Never heard of it. Everything is so detailed. He must know the town by heart. To put a shop there that isn't—" He clicked off the basement light. "And the mortuary. What's supposed to be there? Isn't the—"

"Forget it," Madge called back, hurrying past him, into the warm living room.

"You're practically as bad as he is. Men are such children."

Tyler didn't respond. He was deep in thought. His suave confidence was gone; he looked nervous and shaken.

Madge pulled the venetian blinds down. The living room sank into amber gloom. She flopped down on the couch and pulled Tyler down beside her. "Stop looking like that," she ordered. "I've never seen you this way." Her slim arms circled his neck and her lips brushed close to his ear. "I wouldn't have let you in if I thought you were going to worry about him."

Tyler grunted, preoccupied. "Why did you let me in?"

The pressure of Madge's arms increased. Her silk pajamas rustled as she moved against him. "Silly," she said.

Big red-headed Jim Larson gaped in disbelief. "What do you mean? What's the matter with you?"

"I'm quitting." Haskel shoveled the contents of his desk into his briefcase. "Mail the check to my house."

"But—"

"Get out of the way." Haskel pushed past Larson, out into the hall. Larson was stunned with amazement. There was a fixed expression on Haskel's face. A glazed

look. A rigid look Larson had never seen before.

"Are you—all right?" Larson asked.

"Sure." Haskel opened the front door of the plant and disappeared outside. The door slammed after him. "Sure I'm all right," he muttered to himself. He made his way through the crowds of late-afternoon shoppers, his lips twitching. "You damn right I'm all right."

"Watch it, buddy," a laborer muttered ominously, as Haskel shoved past him.

"Sorry." Haskel hurried on, gripping his briefcase. At the top of the hill he paused a moment to get his breath. Behind him was Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Haskel laughed shrilly. Twenty years — cut short in a second. It was over. No more Larson. No more dull, grinding job, day after day. Without promotion or future. Routine and boredom, months on end. It was over and done for. A new life was beginning.

He hurried on. The sun was setting. Cars streaked by him, businessmen going home from work. Tomorrow they would be going back—but not him. Not ever again.

He reached his own street. Ed Tildon's house rose up, a great stately structure of con-

crete and glass. Tildon's dog came rushing out to bark. Haskel hastened past. Tildon's dog. He laughed wildly.

"Better keep away!" he shouted at the dog.

He reached his own house and leaped up the front steps two at a time. He tore the door open. The living room was dark and silent. There was a sudden stir of motion. Shapes untangling themselves, getting quickly up from the couch.

"Verne!" Madge gasped. "What are you doing home so early?"

Verne Haskel threw his briefcase down and dropped his hat and coat over a chair. His lined face was twisted with emotion, pulled out of shape by violent inner forces.

"What in the world!" Madge fluttered, hurrying toward him nervously, smoothing down her lounge pajamas. "Has something happened? I didn't expect you so—" She broke off, blushing. "I mean, I—"

Paul Tyler strolled leisurely toward Haskel. "Hi there, Verne," he murmured, embarrassed. "Dropped by to say hello and return a book to your wife."

Haskel nodded curtly. "Afternoon." He turned and

headed toward the basement door, ignoring the two of them. "I'll be downstairs."

"But Verne!" Madge protested. "What's happened?"

Verne halted briefly at the door. "I quit my job."

"You what?"

"I quit my job. I finished Larson off. There won't be anymore of him." The basement door slammed.

"Good Lord!" Madge shrieked, clutching at Tyler hysterically. "He's gone out of his mind!"

Down in the basement, Verne Haskel snapped on the light impatiently. He put on his engineer's cap and pulled his stool up beside the great plywood table.

What next?

Morris Home Furnishings. The big plush store. Where the clerks all looked down their noses at him.

He rubbed his hands gleefully. No more of them. No more snooty clerks, lifting their eyebrows when he came in. Only hair and bow ties and folded handkerchiefs.

He removed the model of Morris Home Furnishings and disassembled it. He worked feverishly, with frantic haste. Now that he had really begun he wasted no time. A moment later he was glueing two small buildings in its place. Ritz

Shoeshine. Pete's Bowling Alley.

Haskel giggled excitedly. Fitting extinction for the luxurious, exclusive furniture store. A shoeshine parlor and a bowling alley. Just what it deserved.

The California State Bank. He had always hated the Bank. They had once refused him a loan. He pulled the Bank loose.

Ed Tildon's mansion. His damn dog. The dog had bit him on the ankle, one afternoon. He ripped the model off. His head spun. He could do anything.

Harrison Appliance. They had sold him a bum radio. Off came Harrison Appliance.

Joe's Cigar and Smoke Shop. Joe had given him a lead quarter in May, 1949. Off came Joe's.

The Ink Works. He loathed the smell of ink. Maybe a bread factory, instead. He loved baking bread. Off came the Ink Works.

Elm Street was too dark at night. A couple of times he had stumbled. A few more streetlights were in order.

Not enough bars along High Street. Too many dress shops and expensive hat and fur shops and ladies' apparel. He ripped a whole handful loose

and carried them to the work-bench.

At the top of the stairs the door opened slowly. Madge peered down, pale and frightened. "Verne?"

He scowled up impatiently. "What do you want?"

Madge came downstairs hesitantly. Behind her Doctor Tyler followed, suave and handsome in his gray suit. "Verne — is everything all right?"

"Of course."

"Did—did you really quit your job?"

Haskel nodded. He began to disassemble the Ink Works, ignoring his wife and Doctor Tyler.

"But *why*?"

Haskel grunted impatiently. "No time."

Doctor Tyler had begun to look worried. "Do I understand you're too busy for your job?"

"That's right."

"Too busy doing *what*?" Tyler's voice rose; he was trembling nervously. "Working down here on this town of yours? Changing things?"

"Go away," Haskel muttered. His deft hands were assembling a lovely little Langendorf Bread Factory. He shaped it with loving care, sprayed it with white paint,

brushed a gravel walk and shrubs in front of it. He put it aside and began on a park. A big green park. Woodland had always needed a park. It would go in place of the State Street Hotel.

Tyler pulled Madge away from the table, off in a corner of the basement. "Good God." He lit a cigarette shakily. The cigarette flipped out of his hands and rolled away. He ignored it and fumbled for another. "You see? You see what he's doing?"

Madge shook her head mutely. "What is it? I don't—"

"How long has he been working on this? All his life?"

Madge nodded, white-faced. "Yes, all his life."

Tyler's features twisted. "My God, Madge. It's enough to drive you out of your mind. I can hardly believe it. We've got to do something."

"What's happening?" Madge moaned. "What—"

"He's losing himself into it." Tyler's face was a mask of incredulous disbelief. "Faster and faster."

"He's always come down here," Madge faltered. "It's nothing new. He's always wanted to get away."

"Yes. Get away." Tyler shuddered, clenched his fists

and pulled himself together. He advanced across the basement and stopped by Verne Haskel.

"What do you want?" Haskel muttered, noticing him.

Tyler licked his lips. "You're adding some things, aren't you? New buildings."

Haskel nodded.

Tyler touched the little bread factory with shaking fingers. "What's this? Bread? Where does it go?" He moved around the table. "I don't remember any bread factory in Woodland." He whirled. "You aren't by any chance *improving* on the town? Fixing it up here and there?"

"Get the hell out of here," Haskel said, with ominous calm. "Both of you."

"Verne!" Madge squeaked.

"I've got a lot to do. You can bring sandwiches down about eleven. I hope to finish sometime tonight."

"Finish?" Tyler asked.

"Finish," Haskel answered, returning to his work.

"Come on, Madge." Tyler grabbed her and pulled her to the stairs. "Let's get out of here." He strode ahead of her, up to the stairs and into the hall. "Come on!" As soon as she was up he closed the door tightly after them.

SMALL TOWN

Madge dabbed at her eyes hysterically. "He's gone crazy, Paul! What'll we do?"

Tyler was deep in thought. "Be quiet. I have to think this out." He paced back and forth, a hard scowl on his features. "I'll come soon. It won't be long, not at this rate. Sometime tonight."

"What? What do you mean?"

"His withdrawal. Into his substitute world. The improved model he controls. Where he can get away."

"Isn't there something we can do?"

"Do?" Tyler smiled faintly. "Do we want to do something?"

Madge gasped. "But we can't just—"

"Maybe this will solve our problem. This may be what we've been looking for." Tyler eyed Mrs. Haskel thoughtfully. "This may be just the thing."

It was after midnight, almost two o'clock in the morning, when he began to get things into final shape. He was tired—but alert. Things were happening fast. The job was almost done.

Virtually perfect.

He halted work a moment, surveying what he had accomplished. The town had

been radically changed. About ten o'clock he had begun basic structural alterations in the lay-out of the streets. He had removed most of the public buildings, the civic center and the sprawling business district around it.

He had erected a new city hall, police station, and an immense park with fountains and indirect lighting. He had cleared the slum area, the old run-down stores and houses and streets. The streets were wider and well-lit. The houses were now small and clean. The stores modern and attractive—without being ostentatious.

All advertising signs had been removed. Most of the filling stations were gone. The immense factory area was gone, too. Rolling countryside took its place. Trees and hills and green grass.

The wealthy district had been altered. There were now only a few of the mansions left—belonging to persons he looked favorably on. The rest had been cut down, turned into uniform two-bedroom dwellings, one story, with a single garage each.

The city hall was no longer an elaborate, rococo structure. Now it was low and simple, modeled after the Parthenon, a favorite of his.

There were ten or twelve persons who had done him special harm. He had altered their houses considerably. Given them war-time housing unit apartments, six to a building, at the far edge of town. Where the wind came off the bay, carrying the smell of decaying mud-flats.

Jim Larson's house was completely gone. He had erased Larson utterly. He no longer existed, not in this new Woodland—which was now almost complete.

Almost, Haskel studied his work intently. All the changes had to be made *now*. Not later. This was the time of creation. Later, when it had been finished, it could not be altered. He had to catch all the necessary changes now—or forget them.

The new Woodland looked pretty good. Clean and neat—and simple. The rich district had been toned down. The poor district had been improved. Glaring ads, signs, displays, had all been changed or removed. The business community was smaller. Parks and countryside took the place of factories. The civic center was lovely.

He added a couple of playgrounds for smaller kids. A small theater instead of the

enormous Uptown with its flashing neon sign. After some consideration he removed most of the bars he had previously constructed. The new Woodland was going to be moral. Extremely moral. Few bars, no billiards, no red light district. And there was an especially fine jail for undesirables.

The most difficult part had been the microscopic lettering on the main office door of the city hall. He had left it until last, and then painted the words with agonizing care:

Mayor
Vernon R. Haskel

A few last changes. He gave the Edwards a '39 Plymouth instead of a new Cadillac. He added more trees in the downtown district. One more fire department. One less dress shop. He had never liked taxis. On impulse, he removed the taxi stand and put in a flower shop.

Haskel rubbed his hands. Anything more? Or was it complete . . . Perfect . . . He studied each part intently. What had he overlooked?

The high school. He removed it and put in two smaller high schools, one at each end of town. Another hospital. That took almost half an hour.

He was getting tired. His hands were less swift. He mopped his forehead shakily. Anything else? He sat down on his stool wearily, to rest and think.

All done. It was complete. Joy welled up in him. A bursting cry of happiness. His work was over.

"Finished!" Verne Haskel shouted.

He got unsteadily to his feet. He closed his eyes, held his arms out, and advanced toward the plywood table. Reaching, grasping, fingers extended, Haskel headed toward it, a look of radiant exaltation on his seamed, middle-aged face.

Upstairs, Tyler and Madge heard the shout. A distant booming that rolled through the house in waves. Madge winced in terror. "What was that?"

Tyler listened intently. He heard Haskel moving below them, in the basement. Abruptly, he stubbed out his cigarette. "I think it's happened. Sooner than I expected."

"It? You mean he's—"

Tyler got quickly to his feet. "He's gone, Madge. Into his other world. We're finally free."

Madge caught his arm.

"Maybe we're making a mistake. It's so terrible. Shouldn't we—try to do something? Bring him out of it—try to pull him back."

"Bring him back?" Tyler laughed nervously. "I don't think we could, now. Even if we wanted to. It's too late." He hurried toward the basement door. "Come on."

"It's horrible." Madge shuddered and followed reluctantly. "I wish we had never got started."

Tyler halted briefly at the door. "Horrible? He's happier, where he is, now. And you're happier. The way it was, nobody was happy. This is the best thing."

He opened the basement door. Madge followed him. They moved cautiously down the stairs, into the dark, silent basement, damp with the faint night mists.

The basement was empty.

Tyler relaxed. He was overcome with dazed relief. "He's gone. Everything's okay. It worked out exactly right."

"But I don't understand," Madge repeated hopelessly, as Tyler's Buick purred along the dark, deserted streets. "Where did he go?"

"You know where he went," Tyler answered. "Into his substitute world, of course." He

screeched around a corner on two wheels. "The rest should be fairly simple. A few routine forms. There really isn't much left, now."

The night was frigid and bleak. No lights showed, except an occasional lonely streetlamp. Far off, a train whistle sounded mournfully, a dismal echo. Rows of silent houses flickered by on both sides of them.

"Where are we going?" Madge asked. She sat huddled against the door, face pale with shock and terror, shivering under her coat.

"To the police station."

"Why?"

"To report him, naturally. So they'll know he's gone. We'll have to wait; it'll be several years before he'll be declared legally dead." Tyler reached over and hugged her briefly. "We'll make out in the meantime, I'm sure."

"What if—they find him?"

Tyler shook his head angrily. He was still tense, on edge. "Don't you understand? They'll never find him—he doesn't exist. At least, not in our world. He's in his own world. You saw it. The model. The improved substitute."

"He's *there*?"

"All his life he's worked on it. Built it up. Made it real.

He brought that world into being—and now he's in it. That's what he wanted. That's why he built it. He didn't merely dream about an escape world. He actually constructed it—every bit and piece. Now he's warped himself right out of our world, into it. Out of our lives."

Madge finally began to understand. "Then he really *did* lose himself in his substitute world. You meant that, what you said about him—getting away."

"It took me awhile to realize it. The mind constructs reality. Frames it. Creates it. We all have a common reality, a common dream. But Haskel turned his back on our common reality and created his own. And he had a unique capacity—far beyond the ordinary. He devoted his whole life, his whole skill to building it. He's there now."

Tyler hesitated and frowned. He gripped the wheel tightly and increased speed. The Buick hissed along the dark street, through the silent, unmoving bleakness that was the town.

"There's only one thing," he continued presently. "One thing I don't understand."

"What is it?"

"The model. It was also

SMALL TOWN

gone. I assumed he'd—shrink, I suppose. Merge with it. But the model's gone, too." Tyler shrugged. "It doesn't matter." He peered into the darkness. "We're almost there. This is Elm."

It was then Madge screamed. "*Look!*"

To the right of the car was a small, neat building. And a sign. The sign was easily visible in the darkness.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Madge was sobbing in horror. The car roared forward, automatically guided by Tyler's numb hands. Another sign flashed by briefly, as they coasted up before the city hall.

STEUBEN PET SHOP

The city hall was lit by recessed, hidden illumination. A low, simple building, a square of glowing white. Like a marble Greek temple.

Tyler pulled the car to a halt. Then suddenly shrieked and started up again. But not soon enough.

The two shiny-black police cars came silently up around the Buick, one on each side. The four stern cops already had their hands on the door. Stepping out and coming toward him, grim and efficient.



Illustrator: Paul Lundy

BY JEROME BIXBY



ANGELS IN THE JETS

Though new Bixby stories are rare these days, especially since he made it big as one of the idea men behind the movie version of *Fantastic Voyage*—which showed, in spectacular fashion, that the human blood stream can be far more dangerous for scuba-diving than the Red Sea—at least we can console ourselves with some choice samples of his earlier work. The following phantasmagoria, for instance, in which an interstellar space captain is stranded on a nameless little world in Messier 13—all because his crew keeps putting angels in the jets!

IT WAS chemically very similar to Earth, but much smaller. It circled a nameless Class K sun in Messier 13, showing its one Y-shaped continent to the morning every sixteen-odd hours. It had mile-high green flora, hungry fauna, a yellowish-red sky that often rained, grey rivers that wound smoothly to a tossing

grey sea. It had a perfectly breathable atmosphere — except for one thing. Because of that one thing, Captain Murchison G. Dodge had named the planet "Deadly".

Interstellar Investigation Team 411 had been on one of the sea-coasts of Deadly for three days when Mabel Guernsey tripped over a huge, half-buried clam-like shell. In falling, she struck her head on the point of a huge conch-like shell. Her oxy-mask was torn off, and Mabel Guernsey got the madness.

They locked her up. They walked her over to the *Lance* that stood like a shining three-hundred-foot trophy on its sloping base of brown-black obsidian, created from sand by landing-blasts. They took her inside and put her in an extra storage compartment, and stacked crates in front of the door, and put a twenty-four-hour guard on duty to see that she didn't get away. For it became swiftly apparent that the one thing in the world — or, rather, on Deadly — that Mabel wanted to do, wanted most terribly to do, was to take off everybody else's mask so that they would all be like her.

Murchison Dodge, who was the *Lance's* physiologist-biologist as well as its captain, went off searching the surrounding ecology for some cure for the malady, which was in many ways similar to ergot poisoning. Like ergot, the condi-

tion was caused by the sclerotium of a fungus — airborne and inhaled, in this case, as a curious microscopic unit which Murchison Dodge thought of as a sclerotoid spore. Like ergot, it brought itching and twitching and numbness at extremities; but these were short-lived symptoms, and there was no ergot-like effect upon the involuntary muscles, so the victims didn't die. They only went mad, and stayed mad. From Mabel Guernsey's behavior, Rupert, the psychologist, judged it to be an especially manic form of insanity. Mabel seemed very happy. She wished they could all be as happy as she. She was still trying to grab off oxy-masks when they closed the door on her.

So Dodge went searching for an antidote. He was gone for two days. And while he was gone, the night guard at Mabel's storage-room prison — a spacehand named Kraus, whom nobody liked, and who found himself stimulated by the proximity of a fairly attractive and provocatively irresponsible woman — pushed aside the crates, opened the door, and went in to do some tax-free tomcatting.

When Dodge returned, in the little one-man crewboat, the *Lance* was gone.

Far below, a patch of bright color — red, blue, yellow, purple, with the tiniest glimmer of steel to one side — told Dodge that he

had at last found his wayward spaceship.

So they hadn't gone interstellar, thank God, or suicidally run the *Lance* into the local sun. That had been his first terrified thought upon finding the note they'd left and realizing what must have happened.

The note had been formed by large shells in the sand. It had been a hundred feet long. It had said: *YOU'RE CRAZY. WE'RE GOING. YOU'LL NEVER FIND US.*

And beneath, in smaller shells carefully selected for size and color, the names of the sixty-three spacehands and Team-members of the *Lance*.

Dodge sighed and cut the jets. He pulled the crewboat up into a stall. Its airfoils whined in atmosphere that was like Earth's, but almost twice as heavy. The green horizon of Deadly slid smoothly from the round nose-port, to be replaced by copper sky and yellow clouds and a hazy orange glow that was the sun, and at the moment of immotion Dodge released the chute. It whipped out, obscuring sky, clouds, sun. It billowed and boomed open. Dodge's couch and its empty companion pistoned back deeply at the jar, slowly rose. Dodge half-sat, half-lay, his weight on his shoulders, looking straight up into the stiff white underside of the chute with eyes that were feath-

ered with red and burning under dry lids. His hand went out to the button that would right the couch, but he pulled it back. The lying-down position was too comfortable after eighty foodless and sleepless hours at the controls.

The little boat drifted down, swaying on its lines, the apex of each swing allowing him a view around the edge of the chute. Copper sky. Yellow clouds. Hazy sun.

Back and forth, back and forth; and suddenly glimpses of green replaced glimpses of copper and yellow; the crewboat was among the giant trees. Each swing now revealed a wall of green and brown sliding evenly, silently, up past the port. Behind Dodge the cyclo-drive hummed *mezzo piano*, out of circuit; Dodge's hand rested on the board, ready to drop the boat on its jets should the chute tangle or be torn.

He started the gyro, and the swinging stopped.

He switched on the rear-vision screen. He blinked in astonishment at what he saw, down among the giant roots of giant trees, though he had been prepared for just about anything. He commenced to push buttons that controlled slip-strings. The boat's downward course altered, drifting left toward the clearing in the forest.

A last-moment adjustment brought it to rest on its fins in the

center of a village square.

Wearily, he heeled the pedal that would draw the chute back into its cubby, automatically repacking it as it came. Then he turned on the side-view screens, one after another, leaving them on to get a panorama.

They were all grouped around in a wide circle, looking up at the boat. They were smiling. They were carrying guns. Even little Jansen, the bacteriologist, who had often professed a hatred of guns, had a brace of handblasts on his pudgy hips. There had been dangerous animals howling along the seacoast; Dodge supposed there must be just as many back here in Deadly's vast forests. So the guns argued that the madmen were at least able to recognize that menace, and were ready to fight it for their lives.

The glimmer of steel to one side of the colors was no longer tiny; it was huge and high — and not complete. The proud *Lance* had been partially stripped of her skin. There were ragged, gaping holes the length of her, with skeletal framework showing through, where great curving plates had been removed. Most of them cut out, Dodge saw dully, with torches. The *Lance* would never leave Deadly.

And the bright colors themselves . . .

Dodge felt a cold prickling back

of his ears. The colors were giant fifteen-by-fifteen pine crates from the *Lance*'s hold, a dozen or so of them, and the tarnished plates from the *Lance*'s hull along with some shining new ones from her repair stock — all broken-down, sawed-up, bent, buckled, leaned-together, bolted, welded, nailed, glued, painted and arranged in a mad travesty of a village.

Holes — windows and doors — had been sawn or battered in the crates; and judging by the array of bolts and stays visible on their outsides, some had two storeys. They sat on the thick green grass like giant children's blocks thrown helter-skelter on a lawn. All colors and crazy angles; frills and frippery; scallops and gingerbread, ju-jubes and toyland, polka-dots and peppermint stripes and bright checked patterns like gingham. Raggedy curtains in the windows, moving with the breeze, and a doormat, formerly a seat cushion in the *Lance*'s main lounge, with WELCOME in drying orange. The walls of one crate-house were covered with purple and green and yellow murals whose jumbled, whirling ugliness could have meaning only to their mad creator.

The paint, Dodge thought, must be the petrolatum vehicle for the *Lance*'s fuel, pigmented with vivid clays which abounded on Deadly. It was splotchy, and most of it had run badly.

A little grey stream ran through

the clearing — Dodge had found the *Lance* by following waterways methodically up and down the continent — and several slapdash garden plots were already under way. Beyond, at the edge of the clearing, was the heavy glass and metal heap of machinery that had been in the crates.

Dodge turned the gyro off, but left the slower-starting cyclodrive on as precaution; he might want to get away in a hurry. His trembling, dirty hands found another control. The couch turned slowly vertical; the straps that had held him tight demagnetized, retreated into slots. He got up, swaying a moment on the spider platform beneath the couch, took a deep breath that had acrid jet-odor in it. Then he stepped over to the shaft, found the ladder with his feet. He descended to the airlock.

Through the transparent port he could look down fifteen feet to the ground and see them staring up at him. . . .

Jansen, Goldberg, Chabot, de Silva, Mabel Guernsey, young Jones, Marian — his heart ached as he saw Marian's face in the crowd, lovely as ever and smiling vapidly — Strickland, the four wide-eyed children, all the others. Standing in a wide circle whose center was the boat, and whose radius was the sharp-nosed shadow of the boat. Some presentably clothed, others incongruously

clothed — like de Silva, who wore women's silk stockings and bathing trunks beneath the dress coat he'd affected for social gatherings aboard ship — and many not clothed at all. Dodge saw old, dignified Rupert, who had evidently not elected to come watch the crewboat; Rupert stood nude some distance off in front of a crate-house, facing away from crowd and crewboat, posing motionless with wrists crossed over his head and back arched. There was a puddle at his feet. Rupert was being a fountain.

Dodge worked the airlock mechanism, let the lock open a few inches, stopped it there; he had little assurance that they wouldn't blow his head off if they got the chance. First, of course, he put on his oxy-mask.

Looking out through the partly-open lock, his voice nasal through the mask, he said, "You poor, poor devils."

"It's Dodge, all right," said Chabot, the *Lance*'s Chief Engineer. He stood on the grass with his head just out of the shadow the boat cast, his body in it.

"It's God!" cried Mabel Guernsey, and prostrated herself. Several others did likewise.

"It is not!" said Chabot scornfully over his shoulder. "It's only the captain!"

Dodge looked at Marian. She had moved to the fore of the crowd where he could see her fully.

She wore a halter affair, probably because her breasts had begun to sunburn, and nothing else except the Mercury-diamond engagement ring Dodge had given her. It glinted in the saffron sunlight as she stirred. She was looking, eyes sleepy, at his masked face in the airlock. He wondered bleakly if she even knew who he was. Her hair, unlike the matted dirty mops of several of the other women, appeared well tended; but her body was filthy, streaked with perspiration. Marian had always taken pride in her hair.

Dodge lowered his gaze to the sparkling black eyes of Chabot, who had come forward from the crowd and stood directly beneath the airlock. The man, Dodge remembered, had been a bit of a glad-hander aboard ship, always organizing and taking command of trivial activities; it was likely that this bent had led him to a kind of *pro tem* mayoralty here, for he seemed to be without dispute the spokesman. Dodge began searching for something useful to say.

Mabel Guernsey lifted her face from the grass and peeped up at Dodge. Then she got to her feet, apparently having lost her awe of God. She began to walk around the boat, within the circle of the crowd, staring up at the sleek metal sides. Several of the children followed her, singing nonsense in small piping voices.

Dodge decided that formality might be best. He put his captain's crispness into his voice. "You remember me, then, Chabot?"

"Sure, I remember you," said Chabot, smiling up. His hair was curly and as black as his eyes, with large flakes of dandruff in it. "You're crazy. You're crazy as a coot! You were going to try to make us crazy too!"

Dodge made his eyes icy, trying to frown Chabot down; then he remembered he was wearing a mask, and it didn't show. The frown remained, as he again tried to think of something to say.

"I got loose," Mabel Guernsey said, moving in her inspection of the boat. "Kraus came in, and I ran out, and he chased me. I opened the main airlock and ran outside. Kraus didn't try to close the airlock, he just stood there. Everybody else was asleep with their masks off. They all woke up happy, like Kraus and me."

"And then we went away," Chabot said, "before you came back. We hoped you wouldn't find us. We were sorry, but after all you're crazy, you know."

"Now you can't come out," he added, still smiling, "unless you take off your mask too. We'll kill you if you do!"

Every gun in the crowd came to bear on the airlock.

Dodge moved back behind the airlock door where he could watch

them through the metaglass port. The port would stop a blaster bolt long enough to permit him to throw himself back out of sight if any shooting actually started.

So they'd made plans to deal with the event of his arrival. They were on the defensive. This would have been the most frustrating moment of all, had Dodge actually been able to find the madness-remedy he had searched for. But he hadn't, of course. It might take months of research and experimentation to produce one.

He couldn't help them. He couldn't help himself.

So here he was.

And there they were.

He was hungry. He hadn't eaten since starting back for the *Lance* after hopelessly concluding his search — almost four days ago. When he'd left the *Lance* the crew-boat had had its regular stock of food for two days, no more. Now his stomach was twisting into itself with hunger. And he was tired. God, so tired.

He looked out at the upturned faces, at the tall ruined *Lance* that would never leave this world, and thought that he must be one of the loneliest men in the Universe.

"In fact," said Chabot loudly, "you'd better take off your mask and come out right away. Take off your mask and come out, or we'll push over the boat and come in and get you!"

He stood, smiling and waiting. Looking at him, Dodge thought that the madmen must be eating, at any rate; Chabot still had his waistline. He hoped, with a sudden chill, that they weren't eating each other.

Behind Chabot, Marian turned away, moving with the grace that had always stirred Dodge so. She walked over and stared at Rupert, who was still being a fountain. He stared back, his iron brows crawling up. She pushed him over. She lay down beside him. . . .

Dodge closed his eyes. Marian, and old Rupert. . . . So the woman's passion he had so often sensed in her had at last, but too soon, found its release. Slow, black moments passed. At last he forced himself to open his eyes and felt a dull, sour relief. Rupert, it appeared, was a little overage. He was back being a fountain, and Marian was sitting up, staring at the boat again.

The feeling of relief went away, as if it knew it was ridiculous, leaving only a black hole in his mind, and sick futility, and a small, feverish voice chattering that this was good tragicomedy. He leaned tiredly against the air-lock door. Behind the mask his face felt hot, was suddenly running perspiration. He found himself trembling violently, tight and clotted inside, his clenched fist pressed hard against the mask,

cutting its bit into his lips, and his face was running tears too.

"We'll give you three," said Chabot. "On-n-n-ne . . ."

Dodge could taste blood in his mouth.

The others took it up like a chant, all smiling, surging forward: "Two-o-o-o . . ."

Dodge sagged against the airlock and cried like a baby.

"*Three!*" Explosive, like "*Three!*" always is.

They milled around the boat with Chabot, by furious shouting finally succeeding in getting the effort organized. They shoved and the boat rocked on its fins.

Wildly Dodge went up the ladder. He sprawled across the twin couches to slap the gyro control. The gyro whined into action and the rocking stopped abruptly. He heard laughter from outside. He went back down the ladder to the airlock, in time to stamp on dirty fingers that clutched the very rim of the lock trying for a solid grasp. The man fell back, hooting. Looking down through the transparent port, Dodge saw that it had been de Silva, boosted on the shoulders of several others.

De Silva lay on the grass and grinned up at him. "Damn you, Cap, I think you broke my hand."

A woman — Susan May Larkin, Nobel physicist — came around the corner of one of the houses. She didn't walk; she hopped. She had a bouquet of alien flowers in

one hand and her face was buried in them, and she hopped. Both feet together — crouch — hop! Both feet together — crouch — hop! A big bearlike man, one of the jetmen, came around the corner after her, grinning. He took her roughly by the arm and led her back out of sight. Still she hopped.

Sounds — a soft tinny clatter that could only be pots and pans and other kitchenware from the *Lance's* galley, beaten upon and together — came from the darkness beyond a rough-hewn, curtained window nearby. A certain periodicity of pitch-change suggested that it was music. Across the village, out of sight behind the crewboat, a female voice began to *la-la-la* tunelessly, loudly, in the very uppermost register. The singing children stopped singing to listen.

Dodge said sharply, "Chabot, come up here."

Chabot shook his head. "And have you make me crazy? Uh-uh!"

"I don't want to make you crazy," Dodge said patiently. "Remember, Chabot, I'm still captain of the *Lance*. Come on up. I just want to . . ."

And his voice trailed off, with no place to go. Just wanted to what? He had no cure for the madness. Chabot down there thought he had and was afraid — but he had none. Use Chabot as hostage, then? Why? On threat of



"But mommy, there *is* something under the bed."

the man's death, he might force them to bring food to him. But even then the oxygen supply in the tank at his belt and in the boat's tank wouldn't last forever. Or even for another week. And they quite possibly might abandon Chabot or simply forget him, and Dodge's threats would not avail. And Chabot wasn't going to come up in the first place.

What *could* he do?

"All right," he said. "Stay there."

"I intend to," Chabot smiled.

So seemingly rational, thought Dodge. So well-spoken and logical within their framework of lunatic action.

Deadly's swift rotation had moved the point of the crewboat's shadow along the perimeter of the circle-standing crowd, like a giant hand on a giant clock, marking off alien minutes on smiling, mad-eyed numerals.

His mind rebelled with sudden, almost physical impact. He must do something. Not anything constructive, anything aimed at brightening his incredible position, for there was absolutely nothing of that sort to be done. Just something, something. His mind screamed for action.

"I'm going to shoot," he said in a dead voice, "your damned silly village to pieces. With this boat's proton-buster."

"Oh, no, you're not," said

Chabot. "We were talking about that." Without turning, he said curtly, "Jones —"

Ned Jones, steward and cook's apprentice, ran forward from the crowd. Lithe, slim, young, he sprang to the broad leading edge of the crewboat's right stabilizer. Poised there, he got a foothold on the radar blister a little higher up. Then, one foot braced on the blister, leaning forward a little against the sleek side of the boat, he leaped a short two feet upward, bringing his head about level with the large oval barrel of the proton-cannon. He would have fallen back, then — but he speared one arm into the cannon's muzzle. His body sagged. The muzzle moved an inch downward on its bearings, stopped. The arm broke audibly. Jones dangled, laughing with pain.

"You see," said Chabot. "You're not going to do any blasting, Dodge."

Not so rational after all, thought Dodge. No, I'm not going to do any blasting. But not because that boy's being where he is would stop the charge. He'd just vanish — or at least his arm would — if I triggered. But I'm not going to shoot, because I couldn't do that to him. And because there just isn't any reason to shoot and destroy. Nothing but a crying, tearing, clawing need to do *something*.

But what *could* he do?
So here he was.

And there they were.

Big lonely world, thought Dodge, and my oxygen won't last forever.

Marian was at the edge of the crowd again, staring up at the boat and at Dodge. Her halter had come off — he saw it back on the grass — and she was standing straight and tall and sunburned. She'd always been proud of her carriage, too.

The madness, Dodge thought, was like most others; it impaired value judgements, but not so much any logic built on the shaky basis resulting. Each person afflicted — Chabot, Marian, Rupert whose evident desire to be a fountain might signify a great deal, gun-shy Jansen whose wearing two handblasts might mean as much, de Silva, with his silk stockings — each had become a caricature of himself. The floodgates were down, Dodge thought, and they were living out their unconscious, and so they were happy.

He still felt that he had to do something. A man should be able to act.

"I'm taking off," he said loudly to the upturned faces. "Stand back. The jets will burn you if you don't."

Chabot didn't move. He laughed. "You're not going anywhere either. If you try to take off the boat will explode and you'll die." He stood

there, hands on his hips. "Because we put angels in the jets."

He laughed again, at the look he thought he saw on Dodge's oxy-mask. The laughter caught and ran through the crowd.

Marian spoke for the first time.

"Angels in the jets," she echoed queerly.

And Dodge remembered Marian's knack with a pencil, her certain skill in doodling.

Angels. Always angels. Little chubby, winged angels — almost cherubs.

He watched her as, with that lithe walk and an expression of intense interest, she came forward to pass Chabot and vanish under the stern of the boat. Then he heard her crooning. She sees the angels, he thought. So the madness included a powerful susceptibility to suggestion.

He looked up. Copper sky, yellow clouds. Giant trees, and a village. And he, almost cowering here in the crewboat — to the villagers, possibly, a kind of village idiot. Big lonely world.

Take off? To go where on this big lonely world? And why?

He couched by the partly-open airlock, knees bent, fingertips touching the cold steel. There was a wariness in him, like a beast's. Behind him the gyro's whine, the cyclodrive's hum, were suddenly the song of death.

What did a man live for? All

Dodge's instincts jostled and shoved forward to point to one answer: that in the last analysis a man lived to live.

Maybe in ten years or so a rescue ship would come searching Messier 13 for them. But it would be an almost hopeless search. And it probably wouldn't even happen, for Investigation Teams were presumably self-sufficient, and when not heard from, presumably lost.

"Yes," he said. "I guess you're right, Chabot. If I take off, I die."

He pressed the airlock mechanism. The sliding-door whispered the rest of the way open. Dodge reached up and stripped off his oxy-mask — quickly, without giving himself time to think — and breathed deeply, once, twice, three-e-e-ee. . . .

He moved numbly to the rim of the lock, teetered there a moment on the edge of the world. His burning eyes caught the small mirror set into the wall over the first-aid cabinet; he saw his own face, looked through its eyes into the eyes of the mind he knew, and said, "Good-bye. . . ."

And even as he watched, they changed.

Soft tinkling melody from one of the houses touched his ears

pleasantly. He turned, started down the metal rungs set into the side of the boat, thinking, *But I don't feel much different!* He stopped on the way to reach over and help Jones out of the proton-cannon. Together, they jumped the short distance to the ground.

The crowd, now that the problem of the lunatic in its midst had been solved, had lost interest. They walked away, singly and in groups, chattering and smiling. Jones smiled and walked away too, clutching his broken arm. Dodge noticed with a start that Jones had two other arms — the broken arm and two others with which he clutched it. It was Jones, without doubt. But it was very strange that Dodge had never noticed those three arms before. Well, no matter . . .

Marian came out from under the stern of the crewboat, her eyes shining. Dodge wondered again if she knew him. She started to walk past him, hips swaying provocatively. He reached out and took her shoulder, bruising the flesh hard. Suddenly she was in his arms, flowing up against him.

"I like you too," she was saying hoarsely, raggedly. "I like you too."

They joined hands and began to walk. Marian, probably remembering the hopping woman, began to hop too, and soon it turned into a dance. Dodge joined in, laughing happily.

He bent over once, walking on all fours, just as they were entering the forest, so he could look back under the crewboat and see the dancing, darting figures of the angels in the jets.

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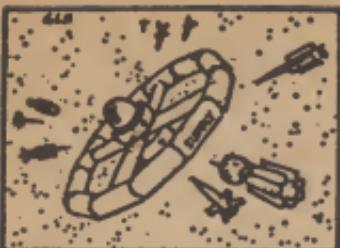
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